

Heritage Charter School: A Case of Conservative Local White Activism through a Postmodern Framework

By Luis Urrieta, Jr.

Of course, there are many reasons why neoliberal ideology would flourish within the context of charter school reform. It is, after all, a reform movement with deep and strong neoliberal political roots. (Wells, A. S., Slayton, J., & Scott, J., 2002)

Introduction

When analyzed within the frameworks of Postmodern Theory, Wells, López, Scott, and Holme (1999) state that “charter schools embody many of the contradictions of the so-called postmodern paradox” (pg. 174). Similarly highlighted are the contradictions and paradoxes of Post-Fordist society, the Network society, neoliberalism, and the market principles being introduced into the realm of educational accountability, education policy, and educational reform. Charter school “reform”¹ is not an exception, but perhaps a great example of all these contradictions.

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This article attempts to enter the charter school dialogue by looking at the charter school movement through an anti-essentialist social movement and new social movement lens. In the anti-Western new social movement conception there are no set patterns to how movements manifest themselves, or how they were intended to manifest themselves, and local context and activism defined as the agency to act through contentious daily practice is paramount (Holland & Lave, 2001). This article then, theoretically places the intended macro-charter school vision as an essentialist, Western social reform movement in education, but one that has not followed a uniform, easily understood, projected, and coherent model. Its manifestation then, has been that of a new social movement without definite and set patterns of generalizability, focusing on local contexts of activism as daily practice, and exhibiting an abundance of contradictions and paradoxes. Principal amongst the contradictions is that reform is intended to level the playing field, to allow for access, and to ultimately equalize. Although superficially, and in the spirit of postmodern simulacra, charter schools have done that, deeper contextual analysis and case studies of charter schools, especially of predominantly White charter schools, reveal differing results.

The rush to open charter schools, especially by minority groups, is out of dissatisfaction with public school education (Fuller, 2000). This can be seen as a move in the tradition of civil rights and social justice movements of decades past. Afro-centric, Latino centric, women centered, etc. charters have been established in this spirit of opportunity and reform (Wexler & Huerta, 2000). However, not just officially declared identity politics interest groups have joined the bandwagon of the charter school movement. Predominantly White groups and wealthy communities have also appropriated the rhetoric of charter school reform using “community,” “heritage,” or “academy” as proxies for race and or class. Nevertheless, predominantly White charter schools display characteristics that are revealing of a systemically racist and classist society. The White Eurocentric cultural capital imposed as the “standard” or “mainstream” in U.S. society allows these schools greater access to resources, both economic and otherwise that allow for their existence and success (Wells, Holme, López, & Cooper, 2000).

This article focuses on the case of Heritage Charter School (HCS), a predominantly White, rural community charter school. Using the “community school” and “school of choice” rhetoric, members of the Heritage community have managed to keep a predominantly White elementary school open for over one hundred years, even when the Local Education Agency (LEA) closed down their redbrick school building in an effort to consolidate. In effect through the postmodern lens, HCS is and is not a converter charter school. A converter charter school is usually allowed to continue using the old school building by the new charter school. In that sense HCS is not a converter charter school because the LEA refused to let the new school use the old buildings; community members, however, use the rhetoric of heritage to say it is still the same school. I would say that both claims are true. Local community activism

through contentious daily practices created a new site for the school using the new charter school reform and the claim to “community” school identity.

Today, HCS has established a good reputation for itself academically and socially as a “community school,” although the meaning of community may have shifted now that the school population is almost as large as the predominantly White retirement community itself, and projected to continue growing. Through private/public partnerships and free market principles, HCS now has an over 2 million-dollar budget. HCS is currently led by a set of community “heroes” that have an abundance of access and knowledge in curriculum, school administration, and political and business connections at all levels of government to make HCS a success. There are, however, several contradictions. HCS does not reflect the racial demographics that it should according to charter school laws; it lost half of its African-American student population in the transition from the old Heritage Elementary to HCS and the current African-American student recruitment efforts are problematic.

By most standards HCS appears to be a success story. It is the fruit of a community’s effort to maintain their heritage through the local school. HCS is a school many community members claim to be the center of community life. But, as a researcher of color with an equity and social justice agenda, after visiting numerous racial and ethnic minority charter schools in deplorable conditions throughout North Carolina, I can not help but to interpret through my brown eyes a different, perhaps deeper interpretation of this charter school’s “success” story. Throughout this article, my “brown eyed” interpretations see in the charter school reform contradictions and paradoxes that are contrary to the goals of equity and social justice.

In the beauty of qualitative research, this case study is but a glimpse of a specifically contextual, temporal, interpretative reality. And although consumers of qualitative research tend to generalize qualitative research findings, those presented here are not to be used to draw final, general conclusions. This case study is to be used for the quality of depth and the questions that a predominantly White charter school such as HCS might raise. A call to look closely at the charter school movement and in particular at predominantly ethnic charter schools (of any race) and the inequalities these might aggravate in terms of access, or lack of access to resources and other economic conditions is overdue.

Methodology

Data were collected as part of a larger evaluative study of charter schools in North Carolina. Qualitative research methods used include individual and focus group interviews with students, parents, teachers, board members, community members and administrators. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and interview logs were written by one or more of the research team members. Ethnographic fieldnotes were meticulously collected over two, two-day visits by a team of researchers. Notes were shared for accuracy and triangulation. Observations in-

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cluded classroom instruction, student interactions, general site and focus group observations. Documents collected included any artifact that might speak to any aspect of the school in question. Assuming publishing costs themselves in an effort to document the community's "past lifestyle and rich heritage" for future generations, this case included a town "history" compiled by two of the oldest community members. Additional data were also collected via the world wide web and include the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

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Heritage Charter School is one of the few charter schools in North Carolina that is primarily White. It is rather "large" for a typical charter school, with over 300 students enrolled K-8, and growing at a 10% rate per year. The school is located in a small, rural, wealthy and primarily White agricultural community. The charter school itself is presently located just down the road from the old Heritage Elementary School, closed by the LEA in an effort to consolidate. The boarded up two-story red brick building remains unused and is a reminder of the importance of schooling and heritage to the community, which traces its history back to colonial times, according to a published "history" of the town.

Community pride focuses around the school and local churches as "the centers of community social life." A community document (the history of the town referred to above)² reveals that a White school has been continuously present within Heritage for well over one hundred years. In response to the consolidation efforts against the last community school in the county, prominent and influential community members decided to spearhead the recently passed charter school law in the state after having a signed petition rejected by the LEA to keep the school open. By applying for a charter to convert the old school into a charter school, they engaged in an effort to "keep their children in the community, in a community, parent, teacher run school" with a long history.

Community "heroes," including the local minister, the head teacher, and retired professional community members, formed a not-for-profit organization to sponsor the school board. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) granted the charter, but the LEA denied them use of the old school building because the LEA was against the school remaining open. Consolidation efforts had been in effect for years and a new and larger school had just been built in a neighboring predominantly African-American community. Viewed as an aggression against the Heritage community and to keep their children in-house, the minister who is also the chairman of the board, a man with a keen business sense, sought out monetary resources to lease a plot of land and portable modular buildings for a new school site. According to the chairman,

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... the former wooded field [where HCS is now located] was donated by members of the community and bulldozers and forklifts were used to clear it. Everyone helped out from community adults to children, ages 4 to 84 were involved.

A White female teacher interviewed recalled the emotional events,

It was so sad the last day before they shut the school down, but the community stood together. People left jobs, farms, etc., to help out. We had one day! (Pauses, as she emotionally signals with her index finger.) One day to get things out! People brought trucks, tractors, etc., and helped out. Then when the new school opened we didn't have the site ready and the churches helped out by letting us use their space, the camps helped out too. You have to understand the community collaboration and contributions made, money and otherwise. The first day of the new school year all the parents, grandparents, and families gathered to wish their kids well in the new school.

Monetary sources set the school budget at over 2 million-dollars and include funding through low-interest bank loans, a \$1.3 million low-interest thirty year loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, community fundraising and "gifts" totaling over \$100,000 initially. The town council also provides yearly cash grants and fundraising continues through the school's capital fund campaign. This campaign, in a neoliberal sense of public/private partnership business-style financing invites corporate, organizational, and private contributions into the "public" sphere of education. Private donations draw on the historical significance of the traditional community school to illicit monies for the permanent naming of buildings, bricks and other structures on the semi-permanent modular buildings on leased land.

School directorship is led by a retired public school principal with over twenty years of experience. Most of the old Heritage Elementary School faculty, except those close to retirement, transferred over to the new school, some assuming key roles in the development and growth of HCS. The claimed ideological philosophy of HCS is of "community school" and is often talked about "as a continuation of the old Heritage Elementary school." This claim seems fairly just and unproblematic; however, when placed into the context of community and county history, paradoxes and contradictions emerge. During focus group interviews community members echoed emotionally their attachment to the local school. An older White community member comments:

I don't know what it's like to go anywhere else. I know all the families. I have friends. There are no strangers here. . . . It's like a continuation of the old school.

A White female teacher at the old school and now at HCS commented:

Yes I'm very happy to have been a part of this [the charter school]. I came over with everyone else who decided to stay. I went to school at the old school, my mother went to school there, my grandmother went to school there, and now my daughter comes to school here. That's the way it was and that's the way it should be.

Local Heritage activism, again defined as local contentious daily practices, to keep

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the school open was justified along historical memory rhetoric focusing on “community” and “community heritage.” Controversy around HCS related to the historical fact that this community is and has been primarily White (almost 90%) and was being forced to send their children to school into a community that is primarily African-American (51.1%).³ Accusations of racism and old historical and societal wounds contributed to an initial troublesome relationship with the LEA. Second year interviews reflect an emerging rhetoric of being the “stepchild” of the LEA, as opposed to earlier rhetoric of separatism and independence. Relations improved following a change in superintendent.

Criticism of HCS by the LEA also arises because it does not reflect the local county racial demographics according to North Carolina Charter School Law (Mesibov, 1997; Brown, 1999). The county population demographics are—73.2% White and 24.6% African-American overall.⁴ This lack of county demographic compliance has been noted in terms of faculty, with only one African-American teacher at HCS, but especially for a lack of African-American student representation. HCS’s non-White student population was 16.4% at the time of the second site visit, which included a high number of Latino and Asian students. This is problematic when we consider that the local “public” elementary and middle schools in the county had a 33.33% African-American student population on average.⁵ Community members argue that county demographics are not Heritage’s racial demographics and that Heritage has almost as many Latinos as African-Americans living in town. U.S. Census Bureau data confirms this. In reference to this issue, a retired community member and volunteer ESL instructor at HCS stated:

We didn’t want to allow them to close a school with such a long and traditional history. We weren’t and aren’t against public education, or outsiders either. Northerners settle here and in general the feeling is good. If this place is different, that’s because it reflects the community not the county. Kids don’t have to come here. It’s their parent’s choice. This area is different than the rest of the county. It’s predominantly Caucasian, and we have more Mexicans now. Some are migrant workers, but others settle here, buying homes, establishing roots, and sending some money back to Mexico. Now there are some anti-immigrant people here, but they [Mexicans] are such hard workers! We like that.

The racial make up of Heritage reflects a long history of *de jure* and *de facto* residential segregation, typical of the South. A Community historical document makes explicit references to a “colored church and a one room old colored school house” during the past century:

About 1917 a new brick building, a 2 story building was built on the campus that housed the 3 room school (pg. 122). . . . When “Heritage” (name changed by author) got its 3 room school, the 1 room building was moved down by the church for the blacks school. I believe they both burned. (pg. 229)

Latino immigrants, while better received as a cheaper source of labor to exploit,

experience a sort of “benevolent racism” by White residents (Villenas, 1996; Villenas & Moreno 2001) as opposed to the segregationist practices and racism against African-Americans in the South for over four hundred years.

Primary racial accusations against HCS were its loss of half of its African-American student population in the transition from the old Heritage Elementary. However, African-American children might have been bussed to the old Heritage Elementary School, as was customary in Southern integration practices that shut down segregated “colored” schools and bussed African-American children to primarily White schools (Noblit & Dempsey, 1996; Cecelski, 1994). If this is the case, then the opening of a new school in the African-American community itself was incentive enough for African-American parents to move their children to the new site. Thus, HCS lost about half of their original African-American student population.

As a result, the former superintendent of the LEA filed a complaint against HCS with the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR). An OCR official review was undertaken during HCS’s second year in operation. Subsequently, HCS hired several African-American teaching assistants and a Latina parent to teach Spanish during the third year. New and younger teachers were hired to address the criticism over lack of innovative practices, including the principal’s son and a Northern Language Arts/Social Studies teacher thought of as a “radical” for showing the movie *Mississippi Burning* against parent and community complaints. The curriculum, classroom set up, and discipline system, however, is very traditional and included the posting of the *Ten Commandments* on a classroom wall, quickly removed after the first day of our second year site visit.

Heritage’s long history as a predominantly White community has resisted integrating their children at the primary level with those of the nearby predominantly African-American community. Through their activism, experience in the public schools, and political and economic local and state connections, they have managed to create a localized reaction and appropriation of neoliberal policies of centralization to remain as they have been for over one hundred years—segregated. Using the neoliberal discourse of public/private partnerships, they established for themselves enough economic capital to insure the survival of their heritage and culture as a healthy image in the increasingly market driven test score competition among North Carolina’s schools.

Charter School Rhetoric and Inequality

During this second visit, I asked about the nature of the Office of Civil Rights investigation. I asked about the personal political connections the community had with the Department of Public Instruction and the State Legislature, and I looked for a history of the town and school. They perceived the OCR investigation as a reverse discrimination aggression and “dirty race card game” against the community. Prominent members of the community had been involved politically in campaigns

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and some had even attended school with prominent state politicians. In the library I found a history of Heritage in which racist statements toward African-Americans, referred to as “darkies,” are clearly written and accessible for all to read. I also confirmed that the school has a 2 million-dollar budget and is run as a business by experienced business savvy people. (fieldnotes, 12/2000)

Charter schools offer limited “liberatory possibilities” for disempowered communities (Abowitz, 2001); however, the possibilities are to be judged cautiously since not only poor communities and communities of color have appropriated the rhetoric surrounding school choice and charter school reform (Fuller, 2000). Abowitz (2001) warns that even in the most hopeful vision for charter schools as a means to greater educational access and equity,

All educational publics are not created equal, at least of cultural and economic capital. Educational publics are not equal in their knowledge about or abilities to procure funding. Educational publics are not equal in terms of cultural recognition, or how the larger culture relates to and respects the right of its members to participate fully as learners or as citizens. (pg. 164)

Similar to Abowitz, Fuller (2000) states,

It is understandable—as anyone who has struggled to raise children knows—that parents are eager to bring up their kids within a familiar community. A return to the one-room schoolhouse is an attractive ideal, for it keeps our communal customs, moral beliefs, language, and forms of literacy within the four walls of that little schoolhouse just down the street. But all tribes are *not* created equal: some elders hold more wealth than others; the parents in some tribes hold better jobs and are better educated than those in other tribes. The retreat into our own schoolhouses—an isolationist rendition of village republicanism—may be good for local community building. But it denies the fact that only in a larger public square can the structural (cross-community) causes of inequality be addressed; family poverty, the hollowing out of inner cities, and resulting inequities in how schools are financed. (pg.28)

Fuller, like Abowitz, clearly highlights that although the romanticized idea of isolationism through “protective” forms of educational institutions such as charter schools is understandable, not all groups of people have access to the same resources. Predominantly White charter schools have greater access to economic resources due to the dominant cultural capital, personal and professional contacts in a society privileging Whites, and economic wealth either already possessed or potentially accessible. Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital refers to the cultural patterns passed on from generation to generation and includes ways of acting, speaking, dressing, eating, etc. (McLaren, 1994). Dominant cultural capital is not necessarily the mainstream, but the one rewarded by societal structures and in the case of the U.S. it is that of Whites of the upper and middle class.

The local community activism generated through the appropriation of charter school reform by White communities such as Heritage, as opposed to disenfran-

chised communities of color, cannot be analyzed under the same lens. The circumstances are not the same even when both communities are of a similar socioeconomic status because racism is another element in society. Before placing the HCS context of local activism or new social movements in terms of the charter school reform movement, however, I wish to revisit our essentialized understanding of social movements. A brief overview of social movements, new social movements, and local activism follows.

Localized New Social Movements and Postmodern Analysis

As the relationship between the state and social conditions change, so the focus and “character” of social movements. Melucci (1989) presents an anti-essentialist approach in studying social movements by identifying an abundance of contradictions contributing to the creation and functioning of movements not following the coherent, essentialist Marxist models. To understand this shift, a focus on economic restructuring in Capitalism from Fordist to Post-Fordist is relevant. Epstein’s (1990) analysis of new social movements is an attempt to lay the foundations for alternative, contextualized analyses of social movements within the current Capitalist political economy. Given that conditions for the proletariat shifted with the shifts in Capitalism within the last thirty to thirty-five years, previous analyses of social movements no longer fit the essentialist Marxist models.

In New Social Movement Theory, culture is emphasized as the site for struggle, since mass engagement of the working class has lost its importance. Changes are attributed to shifts in production, labor, and away from production for mass consumption (Harvey, 1990). New social movements, rather than becoming refabrications of previous movements (Calhoun, 1993), are understood to be transformations of adaptable and multiple discourses in new contexts (Melucci, 1989), while retaining certain elements of Marxism (Epstein, 1990).

Characteristics of Post-Fordist Capitalism, as highlighted by Postmodern Theory, are important to understand new social movements and local activism. As meta-narratives are contested and local narratives are increasingly re/defined, this has legitimized ideological relativism. Capitalism’s shift to flexible accumulation changes the locus of “practice” for social movements, from coherent collectives (working class) organized nationally, to particular, local communities embracing cultural politics, identity politics, and improvisation as a response to time/space compression (Harvey, 1990; Castells, 1997).

Geography and physical space become important when analyzing new social movements in local settings, such as that of the HCS community. When the association between space and place changes, place, as a geographic location, often becomes the driving force in the formation of identity politics and collective action. Thus, we arrive at the notion of reactionary localized movements to economic dislocation because of globalization. According to Castells (1997), localized new

social movements of what he calls the Network society are characterized as follows: (1) reactions to prevailing social trends, (2) defensive identities that function as refuge, solidarity, and (3) culturally constituted, organized around certain values.

Although images analyzed within postmodernist views may be considered simulacra, reproductions or copies of originals, not all images (such as that of HCS) can be dismissed as “depthless”⁶ given the power differentials inherent in a capitalist and racist system. According to Jameson, simulacra are “depthless” images, “fixed with appearances, surfaces, instant impacts, with no sustaining power” (Jameson, as cited by Harvey, 1990:58). Because of this mirage of appearances, charter schools increase fragmentation, decentralization, and deregulation of power. Fragmentation occurs as individual schools dictate their own goals and are increasingly less governed by a central office, such as in charter schools. Although this has the potential to empower local communities, decentralization is questionable when state and public institutional responsibilities are placed on local entities (Wells et al, 1999; Fuller, 2000). By advocating for local autonomy, refusing authority, hierarchy, and immutable standards (Harvey, 1990), charter schools, especially those run by and for communities of color, may be misled. This is particularly so when institutional and societal racism are foundational barriers to accessing resources. Abowitz (2001) states,

If they are to realize their potential to remedy the educational injustices done to poor and nonWhite families, charter school law must aim at both cultural recognition and economic redistribution. Unless aggressive economic redistribution is put in place to assist educational publics that lack the capital—economic, cultural, and otherwise—to cultivate adequate resources, charter schools that serve oppressed and excluded groups will become ghettoized. Like the urban schools that serve so many students of color in our nation, these charter schools will become stigmatized, and any cultural recognition that might be possible through these institutions will be seriously damaged. (pp.165-166)

The “image” of charter schools then, especially charter schools for minority students, is comparable to simulacra of prior forms of schooling since many perceive them to be romanticized images of segregated schools. The celebration of charter schools and their apparent “success” may indeed be images of instant gratification, not yet problematized enough, even when the “paradoxes and contradictions” are highlighted through postmodern theory. The apparent success of charter schools may be an image rapidly re/produced to meet educational consumerist demands using market models of immediate output.

Image thus becomes the driving force when charter schools are marketed as innovative because they provide instant gratification to “tribal forms of community” (Fuller, 2000) while re/creating existing differences. Marketable images, such as high test score results, rather than “depthful” educational experiences frequently sustain White privileged charter schools at the expense of those for high minority populations whose cultural capital is devalued. In fact, one of the major criticisms

of charter schools is their “lack of innovation” (Mintrom, 2000). Since charter schools are not very different than regular public schools, the competitive nature of the phenomenon results in unequal access to economic resources by increasing segregation and by creating images of progressive change that are deceptive. When the rhetoric of charter school reform is appropriated by White and privileged communities a more “depthful” problematic emerges than the mere “image” and ideological claim of a community school such as that of HCS.

The local White community activism around charter schools such as HCS, although small when compared to minority charter schools in NC, should not be perceived as a “depthless pastiche” given the cultural and symbolic capital that White privilege replicates. Further analysis of different postmodern “depths” must be incorporated to larger race and class struggles embedded in the current system. Hidden forms of identity politics within local White community contexts is important to study, as constant improvisations of cultural forms become a key defensive mechanism to changing social and material conditions. When such improvisations (Bourdieu, 1977) are seen as agency, this in turn contributes to the potential for a local or full-scale movement as “improvisation can become the basis for a reformed subjectivity” (Holland et al., 1998:18) and has the potential for collective action. What follows will attempt to illustrate how such improvisation has enacted collective action as a form of local White activism for this community.

White Local Activism

I use the phrase White local activism because of the “conservative” White character of the HCS community. It is a community that fits well into Castell’s (1997) model of a localized new social movement of the Network society. The HCS community is reacting to prevailing social trends, the attempt to close down their local school. The result is the fomentation of an identity that functions as a refuge and reaction to those trends. The innovative move to apply for a charter and create HCS as a “community”⁷ school was improvisational, innovative, provided solidarity, and was culturally constituted and organized around certain values. The values I am referring to are the values of White cultural capital and privilege often made invisible in U.S. society (MacIntosh, 1988; Hytten & Adkins, 2002), and cloaked under ideological claims such as that of “community school” at HCS.

This example of a localized new social movement of Castell’s Network society is evident through the community’s initial petition writing and signature gathering in protest of the closing of the old school. The local community protests were directly taken to the state and began to strengthen a place-based (location) identity of refuge and solidarity, claiming a school history over one hundred years old. “Community” became the foundation for identity from which issues of safety, comfort, tradition, familiarity, and historical memory became central themes, while culture, heritage, and tradition became proxies for race. Thus, the ideology of

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“community” took precedence in the local discourse and in the public sphere. As a White parent interviewed stated,

My children are in school here, I went to school here, my mother went to school here. This school belongs here, in the community. This school belongs to us. It’s a community school.

Another HCS White community member, but not necessarily a town resident, stated,

This school is part of their life. All generations came to school here. They have an input and feel like it’s theirs. It’s the same school, ninety-eight percent of the teachers came with the school. It’s the same school.

An HCS White board members also said,

This is a small community, a small community school with traditional ways. Church is a focal point.

In order to understand my analysis of collective identity here, it is imperative that identity be rethought. Identity can no longer be thought of as static and coherent, but variable, multivocal, and interactive. This statement is proposed for any society, but especially for the postmodern era. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) would say identities are always of this sort. As such, the place-based identity of “community school” at HCS is not and has not been static, but is in a constant mode of production as it reacts to larger “fields” of power (Bourdieu, 1977) and challenges to its existence. Therefore despite the force of its “traditional” character, the old Heritage Elementary School has improvised, re-described itself, and recreated its image for survival purposes as HCS.

Paradoxes and Contradictions: Community School, or White School?

After visiting a predominantly Native American charter school, the conditions between HCS and that school were like night and day, even though both were located in rural areas and both were considered to be “community schools.” One had new buildings, one had a run-down building, that used to be the old segregated Indian school. One had the latest computer facilities, with many more community computer donations on the way, while the other had ten old computers with black screens and green type. One had seven running buses, the other had two that according to the students, “broke down almost every day.” Can you guess which one is which? (fieldnotes, 1/2001)

Framed within the discourse of postmodernity, the HCS community school identity manifests many paradoxes and contradictions. Although on the surface it appears to be uniform, what seems to be uniform is the language and discourse of those interviewed rather than of the entire community. The concept of non-essentialized identity should be applied to the HCS community school identity, especially since it is evident that internal conflicts and possible inter-group

oppression reflecting more durable positional struggles of race, class, and gender are present within its membership (for extensive discussions on durable positional struggles and non-essentialized identities see Urrieta, 2003a, 2003b).

To begin, HCS does not reflect the LEA's African-American student population. The "school choice" slogan, as well as "behavioral and disciplinary problems," "lack of parental involvement," or "lack of competitive sports teams" have all been used to justify this rather than a more honest statement about the racial conditions of this county and the privilege afforded to Whites at HCS. According to White parents interviewed, "Black kids don't want to come here because there isn't a good sports program—that's their choice." Such statement is drawn from the stereotype that African-American students are motivated by participation in school sports rather than academics. Issues of diversity in regard to staff were addressed, as mentioned earlier, by hiring African-American teaching assistants, not teachers, and a Latina parent, without formal training, to teach Spanish.

The students, parents, and community members interviewed were articulate in supporting HCS; however, they were not randomly selected to participate. With the exception of a few students, all of the parents and community members interviewed were White. The only African-American teacher currently employed at HCS and present at the teacher focus group interviews, remained completely silent after introducing herself, and then walked-out about ten minutes into the interview during both of the school site visits. Active attempts to speak with her were eluded and never materialized. One African-American parent sits on the school board and she too remained completely silent during that group interview and also excused herself before that meeting ended. In that aspect the claim to be a "community" school might be contradictory, especially when people who actually live within the physical space of Heritage are only part of the "school community" physically, but might remain silenced by community dynamics and hierarchies.

Operating a charter school officially along White racial identity lines is illegal, but many schools like HCS cloak themselves under ideology (Wells et al, 1999; Wells, Holme, & Vasudeva, 2000b) and alternative identities. When faced with issues of unequal representation of minority or at-risk students, these schools are "most likely to recruit students," and by so doing, "will be able to choose the students" enabling them "to target the kind of students they want" (Geske, Davis, & Hingle, 1997; Wells et al., 2000b). HCS has begun their African-American student recruitment efforts by making flyers, advertising in local newspapers, and by "recruiting at the local black church." However, special consideration in admission is given to "children who live in town, those with siblings already attending HCS, and children whose parents are teachers at HCS." Given the racial composition of the town and of the teaching staff, this perpetuates the racial imbalance. Nevertheless, the diversity of HCS is growing not only in the number of African-American students, but also Latinos and Asians. During a focus group interview, a White male parent responded to a question about the growing diversity in the area and the school by saying,

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I guess that's always gonna be an issue [diversity]. The bad thing is that you end up doing other parent's jobs.

In reference to the number of Latino students, a female parent also stated:

Yeah, I hear there's one of those kids [ESL] in my daughter's class. I guess that's just what has to happen. So many of them are moving into the area. The bad thing is that my daughter comes home speaking Spanish sometimes. So I yell at her and tell her not to do that, that she should be teaching that kid English instead! (laughs)

Choosing students in charter schools is often done through parent and student contracts (Fuller, 2000) and HCS is not an exception. Geske et al (1997) make reference to a study of charter school parent contracts and in general, most contracts specified "provisions with which parents were asked to comply" (pg. 21). Consequently, "if the provisions of the contract were not met," their children could "be removed from the school" (pg. 21). Provisions include that parents provide homework assistance, involvement in school, attendance at meetings, and home/parenting philosophies. For low income, single parent, or non-English speaking parents, this might be difficult to accomplish. Strict discipline codes also lead to student expulsion (Wells et al, 1999, 2002). Blame for expulsion is placed on parents or students and not on denial of admission (Wells, Holme, López, & Cooper, 2000a). HCS uses a discipline code that is said to effectively exit "unruly" students. Parent focus group interviews refer to discipline problems as another cause for the lack of racial diversity.

Lack of innovation is another contradiction at HCS that was evident during the evaluation. Most classrooms have a traditional set up, and instruction is based on the Standard Course of Study. Students confirmed the observations by complaining about "too many worksheets" and overly "extended periods of silent reading." Ironically and as a reflection of North Carolina's educational policies, this school is recognized as "exemplary" for its achievement on the state accountability model. In practice, the Standard Course of Study and a high rating in the state accountability system does not say much for innovation, and yet this creates a healthy image for the school and diverts attention from its racial composition and dynamics.

The biggest paradox is when we look at how this community has appropriated the rhetoric of charter school "reform" to ensure the survival of its conservative heritage and White privilege. The "school choice" rhetoric is also effectively used; however, in practice it has become contradictory in this case, since parents were to have the right to choose schools, not the other way around. Also the "community school" identity, originally tied to place (location) is no longer limited to the physical boundaries of Heritage since a sizeable number of students at HCS do not live in town. However, through the appropriation of that discourse and of the collective sense generated by the constant images of struggle and refuge, *identity* is maintained.

Finally, by drawing on symbolic and economic capital, the school board has been able to fully explore and maximize their potential. This is evident through

HCS's political connections at the state level, and by forming national networks with other charter schools. In securing a sizable amount of capital, this school is able to offer its teachers the equivalent of the state teacher's salary plus a bonus each year. This highlights the importance of problematizing the issue of access to economic resources by predominantly White and privileged charter schools as opposed to charter schools for primarily disenfranchised communities.

Economic Contradictions and Charter School Reform

Charter schools display Post-Fordist characteristics that are contradictory to the promise for equity and equal access. First, economic shifts occurring in "public" education result in a restructuring process of deregulating educational institutions in favor of local control. Second, through market-driven incentives, image has emerged as the dominant competitive force behind school choice. HCS manifests both.

The restructuring process is evident through the funding of charter schools. By allowing charter schools to seek private funding, private/public partnerships are formed according to "free market" principles (Wells et al, 2002). At HCS, the lines between what was traditionally seen as public versus what is private have been blurred. The shifting of traditional public institutions creates private choices with distinct localized educational goals, driven by market incentives that are "stratifying and fettered" (James & Levin, 1983 as cited by Geske et al, 1997). Geske et al (1997:17) state, "because of their emphasis on autonomy, charter schools seem to be part of the market choice system similar to vouchers and tax credit programs, rather than a part of the public choice system." An outcome of this charter school reform movement is a sanctioned merging of public and private enterprise, often distorting prior notions of public and private goods, services, democracy and rights (Wells et al, 2002).

The second characteristic of flexible accumulation is a rapid turn-over rate, increasing the "disposability" of products (Harvey, 1990). The image of public schools is becoming "disposable," as school choice becomes the force behind privatizing reforms such as magnet schools, vouchers, open enrollment schools, and now charter schools. Images drive the competition for students between regular public schools and other school choices. Thus the rapid growth of HCS belies its claim of community school given its expanding size. The impermanence of these images is further exalted when we consider that HCS cannot own permanent physical buildings, yet was able to secure a thirty-year loan during its second year and three years before re-chartering.

Behind the idea of charter schools is that competition would ideally lead to an overall improvement in education—the free market principle (Wells et al, 2002). Encouraged through such competition and market-driven ideals, charter schools would impact local schools to improve their "image" (Geske et al, 1997; Nathan, 1996; Executive Summary, 1998; Mesibov, 1996). The problem behind these

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neoliberal influences, however, is the restructuring process, placing school failure directly on the people operating the schools. The state and its educational institutions effectively redirect failure and accountability away from themselves and the educational system. For charter schools not having the cultural and economic capital to succeed, this results in failure or a truly struggling existence, while schools like HCS experience the opposite. Wells et al. (2000:209) summarize this well,

Generally speaking, schools located in predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class communities and serving a higher proportion of White students tended to have easier access to financial and in-kind resources due to their high status connections. Meanwhile, educators in charter schools serving predominantly poor students and students of color were often overwhelmed by the day-to-day demands of running a school with limited resources and struggled to make similar connections.

Conclusion

At a macro-level, the idea behind charter schools is similar to that of businesses driven by market incentives. At the macro-level charter schools as a social reform movement were to follow similar trends in the spirit of equality and social change. However, as charter school laws are implemented by states, charter school reform becomes more diverse and unequal. Economic restructuring, access to funding, and increasingly segregated student populations in charter schools, impact the amount of resources made available to them. Ultimately, charter schools with higher percentages of minority student populations tend to have fewer resources than predominantly White schools like HCS. As White communities operating charter schools under ideological charters appropriate the rhetoric surrounding charter school reform, they also find ways through parent or student contracts to exclude, or effectively “select” non-White students. Although ethnic and racial minority schools do have empowering potential for subaltern communities, evidence shows that predominantly minority charter schools generally do not have access to resources as do predominantly White schools (Wells et al, 1999; 2000a; 2002; Goldhaber, 1999).

When analyzed within the context of flexible accumulation, charter schools reflect the impact on educational policies by economic shifts. A Post-Fordist economic framework of charter schools clearly manifests neoliberal policies through the implementation of market-driven competition. Deregulation and decentralization policies involving school choice begin a process of restructuring that challenges traditional notions of public and private services. Specifically, shifts in responsibility from state educational institutions to local entities places accountability directly and primarily on local communities, which can be detrimental to high minority population charter schools with inadequate resources, and culturally devalued curriculums, while schools like HCS retain a good and unchallenged image.

Highlighted through Postmodern Theory, charter schools represent fragmentation, deregulation of hierarchies and authority, while images of autonomy might create surface appearances of emancipation for subaltern communities. Overall, the surface image of success in charter schools is deceiving. Scholars warn of the depthless reproductions of simulacra in postmodern images. The immediate gratification of “reproductions” of romanticized segregated schools does not mask the more durable positional aspects of power inequalities involving race, class, and gender that once were the motivation for integration and which a school like HCS highlights. The existence of predominantly White charter schools like HCS functioning under ideological charters, with extensive resources, and exclusionary practices is most troubling, especially when using charter school reform for local White activism, often masking deeper rooted identity politics and discourses of isolation and segregation in these new, conservative social movements.

As this case study illustrates, the effective use of cultural capital, and the access to economic capital are essential to the survival of HCS. This case of conservative, White local activism reflects the appropriate implementation of neoliberal policies that have enabled the school to accumulate a sizeable amount of wealth and through their symbolic capital, an image of “exemplary” academic achievement. By sustaining an identity of “community school,” the HCS community has strengthened a discourse claiming a particular past, asset of heroes, and a language of collectivity.

To conclude, the issues surrounding charter schools and charter school reform as localized new social movements rather than stereotypically Western social refabrications of past movements requires a more complex analysis. With charter schools proliferating in numbers, critical, more detailed evaluations, extended case studies and ethnographies in localized contexts are recommended. Specifically, issues of race, class, and gender, often depthlessly explored in evaluation and contract research should take precedence over focusing on business oriented “best practices.” Finally and most importantly, further detailed analyses of predominantly White charter schools are especially encouraged not only in terms of admissions policies, but also in terms of school culture, parent/student contracts, discipline codes, expulsions, suspensions, and ideological camouflages that function effectively as proxies for race.

Notes

¹ Reform is used in quotes because many do not consider charter schools to be a reform in the traditional sense.

² The document referred to will not be cited in an effort to protect the anonymity of the community. For a specific reference please contact the author.

³ These figures are drawn from U.S. Census Bureau figures. Any explicit questions about the data should be addressed directly to the author, since more revealing information would disclose community identity.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau.

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⁵Data obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Charter School information website, The National Center for Education Statistics District information site, and the Great Schools. Net organization. Specific website addresses are not given to protect the anonymity of the study.

⁶The concept of the “depthless” image has been one generated through Postmodern Theory (Jameson, 1984; 1998).

⁷I use the word community in quotation marks because the use of this word is no longer limited to the local community since the school draws a large number of its students from outside Heritage. In that sense it has come to be more of an “imagined community.”

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