Community identity discourse and the heritage academy: colorblind educational policy and white supremacy

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This study focuses on the case of The Heritage Academy (THA), a predominantly white charter school in rural North Carolina. Through a critical race analysis, this article suggests that predominantly white charter schools like THA benefit from colorblind educational policies in a whitestream and white supremacist society. Specifically, this case study focuses on how white community activism around the creation of THA strengthened a community school identity discourse founded on the principles of whiteness as property. Because of the privilege of whiteness, predominantly white and middle-class charter schools like THA may have greater access to economic and symbolic resources that ensure their success. This article raises questions about the use of school choice rhetoric as a raceless metaphor in the charter school movement that may result in race-based inequality, separation and segregation.

Introduction

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. (Wells et al., 2000a: 209)

According to Fuller (2000) the rush to open charter schools is out of dissatisfaction with public school education. While communities of color open charter schools in a spirit of opportunity and reform (Wexler & Huerta, 2000), white and wealthy communities are also appropriating the rhetoric of charter school reform using ‘community,’ ‘heritage’ and/or ‘academy’ to open largely homogenous charter schools (in terms of race and/or class), usually with greater access to economic resources (Wells et al., 2000a). The race-neutral language of charter school laws...
allows any community the opportunity to open schools, yet complex contextual analyses of charter schools reveal differing results on why certain charter schools remain open, and why some are considered more successful than others.

Legal discourse, specifically the concept of *whiteness as property* (Harris, 1993), is particularly enlightening in understanding why charter schools located in predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class communities and serving a higher proportion of white students tend to have easier access to financial and in-kind resources. In a landmark article, Harris (1993) argued that white identity, historically and legally, has been the basis of racialized privilege and status in US society. Like Harris, I argue that whiteness is protected in US society, in this case through colorblind educational policy like charter school reform. Colorblind educational policy, like colorblindness, is a form of race subordination that denies the historical and current context of white domination (Harris, 1993).

This article looks at The Heritage Academy (THA), a predominantly white charter school in rural Eastern North Carolina. Using the ‘community school’ and school choice rhetoric (Margonis & Parker, 1995), members of the Heritage community have kept a predominantly white elementary school open in their town for over one hundred years, even when the Local Education Agency (LEA) closed down their redbrick school building in an effort to consolidate. In this article, I argue that white community activism around the creation of THA strengthened a *community school identity discourse* founded on the principles of whiteness as property.

By whitestream standards, THA is a charter school success story. It is the fruit of a rural community’s effort to maintain its local school. As a researcher with an equity and social justice agenda (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and after visiting numerous racial and ethnic minority charter schools in deplorable conditions throughout North Carolina, I cannot help but interpret a different version of this charter school success story. This article highlights the contradictions between local control and educational equity (Levin, 2002) in colorblind educational policy (two of the goals in the charter school reform).

Although some consumers of qualitative research generalize qualitative research findings, those presented here are a glimpse of a specifically contextual, temporal, interpretive reality (Gall *et al.*, 1996). This case study seeks to be used for the ‘quality of depth’ (Noblit, 1999) and the questions that a predominantly white charter school such as THA raises about colorblind educational policies. A call to look closely at the charter school movement in terms of racial inequality, access to resources and other economic conditions based on the status of whiteness and the social ramifications of re-segregation is overdue.

**Background and frameworks**

By definition, charter schools are public schools with a ‘charter,’ or contract, with a state or local agency that provides them with public funds for a period of time. The charter states the mission and terms under which the school will be held accountable for improving student performance; thus, charter schools vary considerably. The
goals and mission of charter schools are often based on the motivations of the founding board members, with considerable input from funding sources (Ervin, 1999). Charters free schools of many state regulations and statutes that allow the school to pursue the charter’s goals (Nathan, 1996; Mesibov, 1997). Sponsoring agencies initially tended to be non-profit organizations but now include for-profit funding (Lacireno-Pauqet et al., 2002), including for-profit educational management organizations (Sugarman, 2002).

Innovational teaching practices in charter schools would ideally put competitive pressures on public schools. One of the major criticisms of charter schools, however, is their ‘lack of innovation’ (Mintrom, 2000), especially in terms of teaching practices and pedagogy (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003). Thus, the competitive nature of the charter school movement often results in unequal access to economic resources (Sugarman, 2002), and administrative changes (Lubienski, 2003).

North Carolina approved its charter school law in 1996 (Brown, 1999). Charter schools in North Carolina may be sponsored by non-profit organizations, a local school district or a public university (Brown, 1999). Final approval of a charter, however, is given by the State Board of Education (Brown, 1999). Charter schools in North Carolina are bound to the state accountability high-stakes testing model and the Standard Course of Study (Mesibov, 1997), i.e. curriculum content standards.

Charter schools in North Carolina followed a pattern of racial segregation similar to other states (Nathan, 1996; Geske et al., 1997; Brown, 1999). High numbers of people of color flocked to these new schools as alternatives to their local public schools. Although few in number, predominantly white charter schools were also formed. This re-segregation of sorts, in either case, raises important questions about race-neutral educational policies like charter school reform.

**Colorblind educational policy and white supremacy**

The 1980s initiated a conservative political movement pushing for privatization, standardization, high-stakes testing and school choice (Marciano, 1997; Saltman & Gobbard, 2003). School choice, in particular, is relevant in an analysis of charters. Margonis and Parker (1995) argue that choice proposals are an extension of white segregationist, middle-class strategies that amount to policies of racial containment. Further, they add that school choice pushed by raceless metaphors such as *choice* effectively legitimize existing race-based inequalities and further privatize education. Margonis and Parker (1995: 385) state: ‘schools of choice are extensions of historical middle class movements to create economically and racially homogenous schools.’ Geske et al. (1997: 16) attribute the rise of charter schools in 1991 to fall ‘somewhere on a continuum between public choice and private choice options,’ with choice remaining the main metaphor of equal access.

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.’ Charter schools encourage, however, the merging of public and private enterprise, distorting prior notions of
public and private goods, services and rights (Wells et al., 2002). Margonis and Parker’s (1995) analysis of school choice highlights that the free market is often used as a teleological metaphor that accepts and legitimizes the segregated social and economic networks that currently account for the educational inequalities in US society (p. 397). The re-segregation that results from this colorblind approach to policy makes separation not seem like segregation, but like market choices absent of talk about institutional racism.

While high minority and at-risk student enrollment in charters (Nathan, 1996; Brown, 1999) is often noted, few researchers have written about the unequal resources available to these schools when compared with predominantly white schools (Wells et al., 1999). A study of California charter schools conducted by Wells et al. (1999: 195) indicates that lack of resources in predominantly minority charter schools is problematic, especially ‘when they [charter schools] are examined within the context of larger power relations….’ Fuller (2000) also concludes that a predominance of minority students in charter schools is not an indication of greater or equal educational benefit to minority communities.

Harris’s (1993) legal analysis of whiteness as property is helpful to understand how white identity and whiteness function to ascribe racial privilege and status to predominantly white schools. Historically and legally, only white possession and occupation of land was justified and whiteness was subsequently privileged as the basis for property rights. Because white identity and whiteness were sources of privilege they became exclusionary and legally protected. Past examples of legal protections of whiteness were the ‘one drop of blood’ laws (Spring, 2004), de jure segregation and citizenship rights (Urrieta, 2004).7

An example in education is schools’ ‘integration’ to enforce the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954. The legal mandates to desegregate were carried out in a way that did not disrupt the expectations and interests of whites (Harris, 1993). Schools of color generally were closed and their staff and students disbursed to white schools (Noblit & Dempsey, 1998), where they would acquire ‘minority’ status, sustaining white supremacy. Equitable and equal school integration that included a systemic resource and population redistribution was never fully implemented. White flight to the suburbs and the redrawing of district boundaries subsequently led to persistent residential separation and school re-segregation (Margonis & Parker, 1995). In fact Laosa (2001) finds that US schools are undergoing a new segregation based not only on race/ethnicity but also on language, which results in de facto concentration of poverty and low academic achievement.

Predominantly white and middle-class schools in a white supremacist system enjoy privileged status property. In other words, according to Harris (1993), higher status is a ‘property’ of whiteness and comes with a reputation of objectivity, high quality, justice and goodness, to name a few. For example, use of coded language (Acuña, 1995), or language now used to refer to race in covert terms, like ‘inner city,’ ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘at-risk,’ for schools with predominantly students of color reifies and affirms the supremacy of whiteness. These terms imply deficiency comparable to an ideal, i.e. white, middle class. Margonis and Parker (1995) point out that it is a
common and unexamined white middle-class belief that good schools are predominantly white middle-class schools, and that re-segregation of schools through choice options effectively subordinates schools of choice to specific social and economic networks, making ‘likely an even greater concentration of resources in the most privileged schools’ (p. 395).

The ascription of unearned privilege to white middle-class charter schools results in greater access to symbolic and economic resources that benefit and perpetuate white supremacy because whitestream society is more likely to invest in these schools. Although local school control has the potential to empower communities of color culturally (Abowitz, 2001), it is dangerous to assume that cultural empowerment will come with equal and equitable funding, especially when state and public institutional responsibilities for funding are placed primarily on disenfranchised communities (Wells et al., 1999; Fuller, 2000). Abowitz (2001: 165) adds that in order for charter schools 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.’ The goal of remedying educational injustices done to poor families of color raises questions about colorblind educational policies like charter school reform, especially when racism is far from being resolved in US society.

When analyzing the necessity of race-based educational policy that takes into account historical and contemporary racism it is important to understand, as Harris (1993) aptly points out, that colorblindness is a form of race subordination. Of special consideration historically is the use of racial categories to implement the exclusion of people of color, and the condemnation of racial categories when used for resource redistribution and full inclusion purposes (Harris, 1993: 1766). Colorblind education policy such as the argument for choice through the charter school movement does not function equally or equitably in a white supremacist system, often leading to inequality and re-segregation.

**Methodology**

The data for this article were collected as part of a larger evaluative study of charter schools in North Carolina. The case study design (Noblit & Groves, 2000) was based on qualitative research methods, including individual and focus-group interviews with students, parents, teachers, board members, community members, administrators and funders as well as observations at 16 sites across North Carolina. A ‘collaborative team ethnography’ approach (Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002) was used since approximately 30 people were part of the evaluation team.

Field site visits followed a ‘focused ethnography’ method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) and an interpretive ‘within-site’ analysis approach for each site, while a ‘cross-site’ analysis method (Miles & Huberman, 1984) was used for the overall evaluation. Teams of three to four researchers collected data for each charter school as a unit of study (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Field visits generally lasted two to three days depending on the site with the goal of multiple investigator triangulation (Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002).
Individual and focus-group interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and interview logs and observations of group dynamics were written by all of the research team members, except the interviewer. Ethnographic field notes were meticulously collected using a ‘thick description’ approach with the goal of identifying ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz, 1973). Observations included classroom instruction, teacher–student interactions, student–student interactions, adult–adult interactions as well as general site and focus-group observations (Noblit & Groves, 2000). Documents were also collected and included artifacts that might speak to any aspect of the site.

All of the data collected were shared by the entire team in interpreting and drawing conclusions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Regular team meetings were held over the two-year period when the author participated as researcher. Although prior coding occurred such as identifying ‘best practices,’ new codes, themes and categories were added as the research developed (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Repeated interactions with the data using an interpretive, cross-site analysis of concepts and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were generated as a team to produce evaluation reports.

The data presented on THA in this article were collected by the author as part of the research-team effort using the same methodology, but only the author is responsible for the analysis presented. The author wishes to remain true to the case study by ‘making sense’ of this temporal and ‘social, cultural scene’ (Noblit, 1999). The author, however, also draws from his standpoint to apply a critical race analysis of colorblind educational policy. In a critical race analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the focus is specifically on race and racism. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), a critical race analysis in education challenges white privilege and mainstream (whitestream) ideology. Through this perspective, colorblindness in US society functions as a camouflage for the self-interest, power and privilege of whiteness.

Descriptive statistics were collected from the US Census Bureau, the National Center for Education Statistics and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to enhance this case study. Specific web addresses are not given to protect the anonymity of the community. Local newspapers were used to understand the past and present social dynamics of the community, as was a town history. In an effort to document the community’s lifestyle and heritage, this town history, compiled by two of the oldest community members, was found in the THA library. This document will also remain unidentified to protect the community.

The Heritage Academy: new buildings, old school

THA was one of the few charter schools in North Carolina that was predominantly white during the time this research was conducted (1999–2001). THA had over 300 students enrolled K–8 in 2001, and was growing at a 10% rate per year. The school was located in a small, rural, wealthy and primarily white agricultural community. The charter school itself was 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 remained unused and was a reminder of the importance of schooling and heritage to the community.
Community pride was focused on the school and local churches as ‘the centers of community social life.’\(^8\) The town history reveals that a white school specifically was continuously present within Heritage for well over one hundred years. The town history made 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 [p. 122]…. When ‘Heritage’ got its 3 room school, the 1 room building was moved down by the church for the blacks school. I believe they both burned. (p. 229)

The racial make up of Heritage in 2001 reflected a long history of \textit{de jure} and subsequently \textit{de facto} residential segregation, typical of the South (Anderson, 1988). 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.’

‘Community heroes,’ including the local minister, the head teacher and retired professional community members, formed a not-for-profit organization to sponsor the school. 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 town. Viewed as an aggression against the Heritage community and to keep their children ‘in-house,’ the minister who was also the chairman of the board, a man with a keen business sense, acquired the money to lease a plot of land and buy portable modular buildings for a new school site.

Monetary sources set the school budget in 2001 at over US$2 million and included funding through low-interest bank loans, a $1.3 million low-interest 30-year loan from the US Department of Agriculture, community fundraising and what board members called ‘gifts’ or donations totaling over $100,000 initially. The town council was said to provide yearly cash grants and fundraising continued through the school’s capital fund campaign. The capital fund campaign, in a business-style financing partnership, invited corporate, organizational and private contributions to the public sphere of education by accepting monetary donations as an investment in the town economy. This allowed the school to provide an abundance of resources and technology equipment to its faculty and students. Private donations drew on the historical significance of the old school to elicit monies for the naming of buildings, bricks and other physical structures on the semi-permanent modular buildings of the new school.

School directorship was led by a retired public school principal with over 20 years of experience. Most of the old Heritage Elementary School faculty, except those close to retirement who feared losing their retirement monies, transferred over to the new school, some assuming key roles in the development and growth of THA. The philosophy of THA was of ‘community school’ and was often talked about ‘as a
continuation of the old Heritage Elementary school.’ During focus-group interviews community members emotionally echoed their attachment to the local school. An older white community member commented, ‘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.’

Local Heritage activism to keep the school open focused on the ideals of community and heritage. Part of the controversy around the creation of THA related to the historical fact that this community was predominantly white (almost 90%) and was being forced to send its children to school into a town that was primarily African-American (51.1%).

Reported accusations of racism and old societal wounds contributed to an initial troublesome relationship with the LEA, which by the second field visit were becoming more amicable. Second-year interviews reflect an emerging rhetoric of being the ‘stepchild’ of the LEA, as opposed to the earlier rhetoric of separatism and independence. Relations improved due to a change in superintendent.

Initial ‘attacks’ on THA by the LEA arose because it did not reflect the local county racial demographics. The county population demographics in 2001 were 73.2% white and 24.6% African-American.

This lack of county demographic representation was pointed out in terms of the lack of African-American faculty at THA, but especially for not having adequate African-American student representation. THA’s non-white student population was 16.4% in 2001 (including all Latino and Asian students), while the local public elementary and middle schools in the county had an average of 33.33% African-American student population.

Heritage community members consistently stated, however, that county demographics were not Heritage’s racial demographics and that Heritage had almost as many Latinos as African-Americans living on the outskirts of town, mostly as migrant agricultural workers.

Racial accusations against THA focused around its loss of half of its African-American student population in the transition from the old Heritage Elementary to THA. However, African-American children were 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). Thus, the opening of a new school in the African-American community was an incentive for African-American parents to move their children to the new site, with THA losing about half of its original African-American student population.

As a result, the former superintendent of the LEA filed a complaint against THA with the US Office of Civil Rights (OCR). An OCR official review was undertaken during THA’s second year in operation. Subsequently, THA hired several African-American teaching assistants and a Latina to teach Spanish during the third year. New and younger white teachers were also hired to address the criticism over not having innovative practices. Included in the new hires was the principal’s son and a white woman from New York, whom some students and teachers referred to as a ‘Yankee’ they considered to be a ‘radical’ for showing the movie Mississippi Burning to students against parent and community wishes.
Our collaborative team efforts resolved that very little was innovative about the curriculum, classroom set-up and discipline system at THA. The posting of the *Ten Commandments* on a classroom wall, removed after the first day of our second-year site visit, was included as part of the discipline code. Success for students was defined by their performance on End of Grade (EOG) standardized test scores as mandated by the state accountability program and the Standard Course of Study (SCS). The Accelerated Reader and Saxon Math Programs were used and student percentage scores and their pictures were displayed on hallway walls. When asked, teachers believed displaying students’ pictures with their test scores would increase their students’ motivation to improve their scores. North Carolina’s perspective on success is defined by standardized measures; that was found consistently in all charter schools studied across the state (Noblit & Corbett, 2001).

**Community identity discourse**

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that Heritage strengthened a community identity discourse around THA that allowed it to keep its local, predominantly white school. *Community identity discourse* in this article is defined as the language, artifacts, histories and testimonies that re/create and sustain the identity of ‘community’ in Heritage that is closely associated with THA. Holland *et al.* (1998: 3) define identities as ‘self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance.’ In this study, the community identity discourse that was strengthened by the events surrounding the creation of THA had a strong emotional resonance because schools were an important part of rural community culture and identity (Peshkin, 1982; Reynolds, 1999). An important aspect of the community identity discourse at THA, in part created and sustained by the leaders/heroes of the community, is the cultural production of collective emotional images that are central to the formation of more intimate forms of identity (Holland *et al.*, 1998). More intimate forms of identity are formed when subjectivities become better organized around certain issues or events in the personal lives of people individually or collectively.

In the case of Heritage and the THA, subjectivities became better organized at both the collective and the personal level by drawing on the history-in-person and the history-in-system (Bourdieu, 1977; Holland & Lave, 2001) of the people and events surrounding the closing of the old Heritage Elementary School. History-in-person refers to each person’s individual subjective experience and narrative around and about the school, both the old school and THA. History-in-person accounts are narratives told as testimonies by the people who lived through the experience and were changed subjectively by it.

History-in-system refers to the actual and structural sequence of events that did in fact occur. For example, the old school was closed in an effort to consolidate by the LEA. It remained boarded up by the main road, not far from the main church. This effort to consolidate is the history-in-system. The identities that were strengthened resulted as ‘social products’ of the events that occurred around this particular time and place (Melucci, 1988). In other words, people’s subjectivities around the issue of
community and especially around the creation of THA became better organized because of these experiences, allowing them to form more intimate and social identities. How these events were experienced and interpreted by the individuals living through them is the history-in-person.

In the case of THA, the history-in-system provided this community with ‘space for authoring’ (Holland et al., 1998). A space of authoring enables people in practice with the agency, or the opportunity, to re/create themselves either by reinforcing their identities or creating new ones. The closing down of the old school and the opening of THA allowed the space for the creation of stories, or testimonies, regarding the closure, the struggles and the perceived persecution that led to the white community’s activism to maintain a separate school. Collective images and collective ‘voices’ of resistance and survival became essential in the definition of self for THA, even for people who did not originally take part in the local contentious practices that led to its creation.

Significant narrators, or ‘the owners of the most influential voices’ (Sfard & Prusak, 2005: 18) of this identity discourse, functioned as key carriers of the cultural messages about THA and were also those with the greatest impact for action. These significant narrators, or ‘community heroes’ as they were referred to by people in Heritage, were instrumental in the creation and continued success of THA. The following section will illustrate how these significant narrators shaped the community identity discourse into a collective ‘community’ effort and voice.

Community heroes as significant narrators

The community heroes to be described possessed knowledge and resources to run a school effectively, from the curriculum, to administrative duties, to access legal and economic resources. Because of their involvement, THA did well in the realm of education and in networking with other charter schools. Using school choice rhetoric, THA was recognized by the state accountability system as a School of Distinction. These three leaders illustrate that ‘not all tribes are created equal and not all tribe members have the same status’ (Fuller, 2000). What Fuller implies by way of metaphors when referring to the ‘tribalizing’ effect of charter schools is that whiteness is endowed with property that privileges whites with access to status and resources, while other publics do not have the same access. These leaders are examples of how this is so at THA.

The first significant narrator was THA’s director, whose main function was that of a public school principal. Retired from public school administration, he settled in Heritage just prior to the closure of the old school. With over 20 years of experience, and a great sense of discontent with public schools, this man was recruited to THA for his knowledge and experience to run the school effectively.

I wasn’t sure what my role would be. At this school I do the work of a principal and superintendent…. My role turned out to be different than what teachers envisioned. I work from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in the evening. I deal with a lot of things I didn’t deal with as a high school principal. Things change daily. A principal cannot do anything without interruption.
Despite all of the responsibilities he has, this ‘Southern gentleman,’ as he referred to himself, was content with his role:

Flexibility is important in running a school. If we decide to do something here we don’t have to ask for permission. See in the public schools [in reference to his administrative jobs prior to this one] I had ideas and plans that were ignored and I felt unimportant. I had a history of trying to get parents involved and it didn’t work. The only thing I wish I had here is more time to go fishing.

When asked what advice he had for people trying to establish a school with the degree of success THA enjoys, he said, ‘Make sure you have someone in charge who has had experience, especially an administrator. You have to know who the clientele is and not put off decisions.’

A second significant narrator was the minister of one of the local churches, one of the original founding board members, and also chairman of the committee handling the budget. Having worked on past political campaigns, this man had a keen business sense, was instrumental in ‘establishing connections,’ acquired funding from the US Department of Agriculture, and secured a sizeable budget to maintain and expand the school. When asked what his interest in THA was, he said:

I’m a multibillion-dollar businessman. I’m a retired nuclear engineer, but my mother went to school here in the community and my sister is a teacher here. So I had self-interest in the school. I’m simply managing the current budget, which is over 2 million, as best we can. This school is currently the biggest development in the county…. I’m not in favor of business necessarily, but we are a small business with a very special goal that is well worth it. We have been criticized for not being innovative, but we have been innovative in securing sources of funding. That is the most innovative thing and offering people and parents a choice about where to send their kids.

He expressed his emotional investment in THA by adding that he was part of the original group that wrote the charter and an active member throughout its existence. He was instrumental in strengthening networks with politicians and other charter schools by attending conferences in North Carolina and other states.

I attended a charter school conference in DC. There I learned a lot about handling the money responsibilities with legal advice. Now we hire a lawyer for legal advice at a set price of $10,000 and next year at $24,000. But it’s important because a lawsuit can put a charter school out of business so we have to be careful with what we do.

When asked for his advice to other people and organizations interested in charter schools he added:

I would say, just do it! But have someone with a business sense on board. It’s [a charter school] a small business serving people. We have to listen to our customers well…. Also pay attention to financing reporting because it’s public money and attending DPI [Department of Public Instruction] meetings. Keep a list of fines and forfeitures and do some research on modular buildings.

Upon commenting on the black and red colors of the new gym and community center during the second-year visit he smiled proudly and said, ‘Yes, black and red. Good old Methodist colors.’
A third significant narrator was the lead teacher. A community resident, a teacher at the old school for many years and the minister’s sister, she possessed the leadership skills and curriculum knowledge that gave this school the academic know-how necessary to interact effectively with the LEA and other educational institutions. Upon meeting me during the first-year visit, she was eager to show me around and at the point of tears told me about the initial struggle to keep their old school open. During teacher focus-group interviews she was one of the most outspoken and emotional participants:

During any school event, we always had two to three generations of community members attending. That is important, that there are no strangers here…. Heritage Elementary School was the last community school not brought in. To the LEA we were a test site. They tried new things on us like Sex Education and other stuff over the years. But to us, and to this community, this school [referring to THA and the old school as the same] has a deeper meaning. It is our school.

During an individual interview, in regard to THA and teacher input and voice she responded:

It’s always been this way here, but we do have more input now, more of a say because we have more faculty and don’t have to wait for decisions to be made at the LEA. In the beginning there was so much to do! An idea would come out and it was that person’s responsibility to carry it through. Also parents come in and organize when they don’t like something for a change!

As advice to other prospective charter schools she advised:

Make sure you have connections with Raleigh. You have to know how to work it [implying the system] and you have to know how schools and charter schools work. Have someone on board that knows the curriculum.

Each of these three significant narrators, through their presence and contributions to THA, were important in shaping the collective voice of the community identity discourse. Not only were their physical contributions important in terms of work, but also in terms of how their subjectivities helped shape those of the other members of the community since they functioned as spokespeople for THA. Although several other key players made THA’s success possible, these three stood out and were sought out by others for direction. What is significant about these and all the other community leaders at THA is the great abundance of economic and symbolic resources they had access to. In the following section I will focus on the collective emotional organization of this community identity discourse and how this led to the white activism whose participants refused to give up their local school.

**Collective emotion, subjectivity and local white activism**

The people interviewed at THA generally spoke evocatively and emotionally about the closing of the old Heritage Elementary School. Nearly all of them spoke about the fundraising, the actual boarding up of the old school, the meetings, the organizing and the community members’ cooperation in clearing the field for THA. Testimonies
by the people who experienced the event and had been changed by it were abundant, but people who were not present and ‘joined the community later’ also retold the events as if they had seen the events themselves. The following are short accounts of the events surrounding the closure of the old Heritage Elementary School. According to the chairman:

… the former wooded field [where THA 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 also 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.

Another white female teacher at the old school and now at THA 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.

As the above narratives show, it was not uncommon to hear quivering voices and see eyes well up with tears as they related the background in the creation of THA. It is also important to note that this emotional and subjective involvement tied it to a long history connected to the old school for multiple generations of people at Heritage.

Intimate identity formations, through the community’s subjective involvement, contribute to the re/strengthening of the community identity discourse of which the old and abandoned school building on the main street in town is a constant reminder. Artifacts such as the old Heritage Elementary School, boarded up and abandoned, function as semiotic mediators for identity development (Holland et al., 1998), that acquire meanings with strong emotional resonance for community members. To them, the old school mediates, or stands as a physical reminder of their perceived ‘aggression on the community by the LEA’ and their ‘collective struggle,’ or activism, to save their school.

Clearly, the old school and THA form a physical and emotional space for community members and for community membership; a membership no longer limited only to the sectors of the community that originally invested in THA, but including those beyond the community’s boundaries as the school’s student population grows. The space of authorship for this identity, caused by the history-in-system, experienced as history-in-person, shaped by significant narrators, and artifacts such as abandoned buildings and a discourse of collective struggle, was subjectively and emotionally appropriated by the ‘community’ as a whole. This emotional discourse of collectivity
is a discourse that thickens and expands its borders and definition of what community identity means over time. By thickens and expands its borders, I mean that the community identity discourse becomes stronger and more clearly defined in response to questioning, and also more accessible to people, including people who do not live in Heritage but whose children attend school there.

In terms of size, the THA student population is disproportionately approximately 80% that of the total Heritage community population because a large number of the student body were drawn from ‘outside’ the physical boundaries of town in 2001. A large number of primarily white students attend THA from nearby towns and villages. In terms of language, comments by non-town residents reflect the appropriated discourse, referring to themselves and the school as a ‘community school’ of choice they chose to be a part of. A teacher and outside resident states this well by saying, ‘We are part of the community. Once you form part of THA, you become part of the community and it doesn’t matter if you live here or not.’

‘Community’ in this community identity discourse context extends itself beyond our traditional understanding of community and acquires the characteristics of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983). The innovative aspect of this local white activism is important to consider given its conservative character and the many problematic contradictions that arise from it, i.e. the tension between local control and educational equality and equity issues. It is important to call this example a case of local white activism given that society tends to have stereotypes of what activism is and who activists are supposed to be (Urrieta, 2005). This helps to shift our perception of activists and activism. Most importantly, what has been configured through this community identity discourse and local white activism is a predominantly white community school with a particular past, a set of community heroes, and a changing discourse of collectivity that seeks to maintain itself separate from the neighboring school, which consists predominantly of students of color.

Community school, or white school: a critical race analysis of THA

I must begin by stating that I am not unsympathetic to the issue of school consolidation (Peshkin, 1982; Reynolds, 1999), especially of rural schools that were a vital part of community cultural life and identity (Miller, 1995). However, the THA community identity discourse and its heroes raise larger questions about access to resources and racial segregation in the charter school movement. Although on the surface Heritage appears to be a uniform community, what seems to be consistent is the language of the discourse of those interviewed rather than of the entire community. The concept of non-essentialized identity should be applied to the THA community identity discourse and other charter schools that claim to run community schools in order to deconstruct what community means in terms of full membership. Non-essentialized identity refers to not accepting characteristics and beliefs as universal for entire groups of people, but to problematizing and questioning whether indeed inter-group differences exist.
The first issue that comes to mind is that THA does not reflect the LEA’s African-American student population. The choice argument, as well as ‘behavioral and disciplinary problems,’ ‘lack of parental involvement’ and ‘lack of competitive sports teams,’ were repeatedly used by interviewees to justify why more African-American students did not attend THA. White parents, students and community members echoed, ‘Black kids don’t want to come here because there isn’t a good sports program—that’s their choice.’ Such a statement, in my opinion, is drawn from the stereotype that African-American students are motivated by participation in school sports rather than academics. The metaphor of choice as a function of the market, and not of racism, is used to justify the lack of diversity. Issues of diversity in regard to staff were addressed by hiring African-American teaching assistants and a Latina to teach Spanish, not teachers or administrators. Again, the most powerful roles were reserved for whites.

The students, parents and community members interviewed were articulate in supporting THA; however, they were not randomly selected to be interviewed since the THA staff insisted on arranging all the interviews prior to our visits. With the exception of a few students, all of the parents and community members interviewed were white. The only African-American teacher employed at THA and present at the teacher focus-group interviews remained silent after introducing herself, and then walked out about 10 minutes into the interview during both of the school site visits. Active attempts to speak with her never materialized. One African-American parent and resident of Heritage sat on the school board the first year of the study and also remained silent during that focus-group interview. She excused herself before that meeting adjourned and although the team tried to contact her individually, this never materialized either. In that aspect the claim to be a ‘community’ school is questionable. The question is: is THA really a ‘community’ school that embraces all members equally, or is full membership reserved only for some people?

Research has shown that predominantly white charter schools cloak themselves under ideology (Wells et al., 1999; Wells et al., 2000b) and alternative identities such as ‘community school’ using choice rhetoric to maintain largely homogenous and separate racial and or class schooling environments (Margonis & Parker, 1995). When faced with issues of unequal representation of minority or at-risk students, these schools tend to recruit and target the students (Geske et al., 1997; Wells et al., 2000b) they deem acceptable in their community. THA began its student recruitment efforts in 2001 by advertising through flyers, in local newspapers and at the local black church. More active attempts to invite African-American families to send their children to THA were not reported. Of note is that although new students were reported to be admitted on a lottery system, special consideration in admission was said to be given to ‘children who live in town, those with siblings already attending THA, and children whose parents are teachers at THA.’ Given the racial composition of the town (90% white), of the teaching staff, and of the students already attending (83.6% white in 2001), this would perpetuate the racial imbalance.

Reluctantly, the diversity of THA is growing not by drawing more African-American students, but by an increase in Latina/o and Asian students who somehow
seem more acceptable to this community. In reference to this issue, a retired community member and volunteer ESL instructor at THA stated:

We didn’t want to allow them [LEA] 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 parents’ 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!

Latino immigrants, while better received as a cheaper source of labor in agricultural communities such as Heritage, experience a sort of ‘benevolent racism’ by white residents (Villenas & Moreno, 2001) as opposed to the long history of segregation practices and racism against African-Americans in the South.

During a focus-group interview, a white male parent responded to a question about increasing the diversity at THA by saying, ‘I guess that’s always gonna be an issue [diversity]. The bad thing is that you end up doing other parents’ jobs.’ Via coded racist language this parent implied that white parents are good parents who end up doing the good parenting that parents of color do not do. Specifically, in reference to Latina/o students, a female parent 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)

Again, via coded language, the reference to those kids implied difference, and not only difference but negative difference. Her negative approval of her daughter learning Spanish implies that, in diversifying, cultural exchange is not the goal but cultural domination. I raise the question again, what does community mean in this setting? Who are full members at THA, and who are not?

Choosing students in predominantly white charter schools is often done through parent and student contracts (Fuller, 2000). THA used parent contracts and made use of a strict discipline code that was reported by several people interviewed to effectively exit ‘unruly’ students. Parent focus-group interviews referred to discipline problems as another cause for the low number of African-American students. Once again, use of coded language implied that African-American students were discipline problems and although they were admitted, they often chose not to stay because of ‘bad behavior.’ An eighth grade, white, male student shed light on class and geographic issues as well:

This is a school of choice. If people want to come here they can, but they have to live up to what is expected. We’re supposed to be self-directed here. If some people can’t keep up, they have to ask for help or get it somewhere else. That’s their responsibility not anyone else’s. We also have manners here and we behave like gentlemen, not like rednecks or Yankees. If some people don’t know how to behave, then they shouldn’t come here.
These coded and explicit statements reflected a lot of what members of THA said about diversity, especially about the low number of African-American students. In general members of THA expressed that if certain kinds of students did not attend their school, it was because they chose not to rather than because this community might be a hostile environment for people of color. Margonis and Parker (1995) would argue that the raceless metaphor of choice, yet again, effectively legitimizes race-based separation.

The biggest question arises when we look at how this community appropriated the rhetoric of charter school reform and choice to ensure the survival of its white heritage and privilege in a system based on whiteness as property. While the school choice rhetoric is effectively used as a metaphor for equity, in practice it is contradictory in this case, since parents were to have the right to choose schools, not the other way around. Also the community school identity discourse, originally tied to place (location) is no longer limited to the physical boundaries of Heritage since a sizeable percentage of students at THA do not live in town. However, through the creation and expansion of that discourse and of the collective and emotional sense generated by the constant images of struggle and refuge, the community identity discourse is maintained. The community identity discourse is also passed on, so it expands, as certain people are recruited into it and acquire full membership in this 'community' identity over time.

Drawing on the property of whiteness, which creates an image of good school for THA, the board accessed an abundance of material and symbolic resources. This was evident through THA’s political connections at the state level, and by forming national networks with other charter schools. With its sizable budget, this school paid its teachers the equivalent of the state teacher’s salary plus a bonus each year. To students, THA offered state-of-the-art technology equipment, abundant classroom resources, trips, and a new gym and community center built in 2001. This draws attention to predominantly white and middle-class schools’ access to economic resources.

THA is also an example of how charter schools form private/public partnerships according to ‘free market’ principles (Wells et al., 2002) that benefit whites disproportionately and that result in unequal outcomes. THA cannot own permanent physical buildings by law and works under a charter that has to be re-approved every five years, yet was able to secure a 30-year $1.3 million loan during its second year in operation, and three years before re-chartering. House (1999) would insist that the inverse race question is important to ask: Would whitestream society be willing to invest in an African-American rural charter school in the same way? For charter schools not having access to whiteness and white identity, the free market competition of the charter school movement often results in failure or a truly struggling existence, while schools like THA experience the opposite (Wells et al., 1999; Wells et al., 2000a).

To conclude this analysis, I am not claiming that the racism that I perceived at Heritage and at THA is deliberate. The members of this community and its significant narrators might not be aware of how the system is designed to benefit their race via their community identity discourse and may truly be engaged in a struggle to protect themselves, their community and their local school. Like the race subordination in colorblindness, however, their racism may not be deliberate because it does not have
to be. That is precisely where the danger of colorblindness lies, in the seemingly race-
neutral aspects of its policies. Similarly, their claim to success using colorblindness as
a justification may be attributed to their hard work avoiding the issue of how their color
benefits them and how whitestream society helps them to have access to networks and
economic resources, while choice is used as the raceless metaphor for race-based
separation and segregation.

Conclusion

As colorblind charter school laws are implemented using school choice rhetoric, char-
ter school reform takes on diverse forms of implementation that result in unequal and
inequitable resource distribution. Although charter schools with predominantly
students of color might appear to have empowering potential, studies show that these
schools generally do not have access to economic resources as do predominantly
white schools (Goldhaber, 1999; Wells et al., 1999, 2000a, 2002) like THA. This
translates into charter schools with predominantly students of color being perceived
as ‘bad schools,’ with unequal economic resources available to them as compared
with predominantly white middle-class schools like THA.

The existence of predominantly white middle-class charter schools like THA functioning under ideological charters, such as heritage and community school, with extensive resources is most troubling, especially when using charter school reform for local white activism, often masking discourses of white supremacy and race and class separation and segregation. As the case study illustrates, the value of whiteness in a white supremacist system plays an important part in the survival of THA. By sustaining an identity of ‘community school,’ the THA community strengthened a discourse claiming a particular past, an asset of heroes, and a language of collectivity embedded in whiteness that highlights the tension between local control, educational equity and colorblind educational policies. To conclude, as long as we continue to advocate for colorblind educational policies in a white supremacist system, we will continue to promote unequal treatment of people of colour in U.S. schools.

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script was presented at the annual meetings of the American Educational Studies Association, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2000.

Notes

1. The concept of race is now widely understood as a social construct created to rationalize oppression. Scholars in philosophy, literary theory, cultural studies, history, anthropology and
geography have demonstrated how constructions of race such as ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ are unstable, situated products of particular historical, political and cultural moments. I am also aware that what it means to be a member of a racial group is different for each person and also differs across time and place. Yet, for the purposes of this article, racialization is a historical product of a socially constructed understanding created to justify the superiority of whites and subsequently the inferiority in different degrees of people of color in US society.

2. Colorblind educational policy, in this article, refers to the implementation of policies and reform, like the charter school movement, that does not include a complex analysis of historical and existing racial inequality, or provisions for implementation that strive toward equality and equity across racial groups without leading to group segregation, separation or isolation. Color-blind or race-neutral educational policy would be appropriate in a society without a racist past and present.

3. Thompson (1999) states that in a multicultural and racist society, like the US, colorblindness is the whitestream’s (see note 7) refusal to acknowledge color (race) by claiming to take a moral and democratic stance. This refusal, however, really means a lack of acknowledgement to ‘recognize the obstacles facing people of color or to see that, depending on the context, different ethnic and racial groups may have distinct needs and interests’ (p. 143)

4. All of the names for people and places used in this article are pseudonyms.

5. The author wishes to clarify that he is not unfamiliar with or unsympathetic to the literature on rural identity and education, community schools, consolidation efforts that erode a sense of community, and equality of educational opportunities (Peshkin, 1982; Miller, 1995; Reynolds, 1999) The focus of this article, however, is on the tension between local control and educational equity in the charter school movement and how that relates to colorblind educational policy implementation through a critical race analysis.

6. Sandy Grande (2000) refers to ‘whitestream’ as the cultural capital of whites in almost every facet of US society. Grande uses the term whitestream as opposed to mainstream in an effort to decenter whiteness as dominant. Whitestream, according to Claude Denis (1997), is a term that plays on the feminist notion of ‘malestream.’ Denis defines Whitestream as the idea that while (Canadian) society is not completely white in sociodemographic terms, it remains principally and fundamentally structured on the basis of the Anglo-European white experience. Whitestream in this article therefore refers to the official and unofficial texts used in US society that are founded on the practices, principles, morals, values and history of white Anglo-American culture, i.e. white cultural capital. I must clarify that the whitestream is not exclusively the domain of whites in US society, but of any person actively promoting white models as ‘standard.’

7. The following is cited from Urrieta (2004): ‘Historically, whiteness was associated with being eligible for US citizenship. During the height of immigration from Europe, the meaning of whiteness was debated because immigrants were valued by capitalists for cheap labor, but this need conflicted with republican and nativist ideas about who should become a citizen (Jacobson, 1999) Between 1878 and 1952, for example, applicants for citizenship tried to establish that they were white, which forced the courts to detail reasons for rejecting or accepting their petitions (Spring, 2004.)’

8. In line with traditional ethnographic methods, direct quotes henceforth in the article are drawn from the data themselves. Either from interview transcripts or fieldnotes, items in direct quotes were explicitly taken from the data and are not meant to emphasize points or researcher interpretations.


11. Data 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.
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