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**ALL IN THE FAMILY: COMMUNITY, CLASS AND CARING
IN AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

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**ALL IN THE FAMILY: COMMUNITY, CLASS, AND CARING
IN AN AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

by

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**ALL IN THE FAMILY: COMMUNITY, CLASS AND CARING
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The education and socialization of children occurs within the overlapping spheres of family, school and community. This dissertation explores how administrators and teachers within one elementary school sought to address the needs of their students, in response to perceived deficiencies of their students' families and community. Data collected during two and a half years in the life of a predominately African American elementary school includes interviews with 61 teachers, administrators and school staff, observation of classroom and school events, and an analysis of existing school records. The principal's deliberate recruitment of African American men teachers created a unique case for incorporating both women and men teachers' understanding about their responses to students' families and surrounding community. Teachers and other school personnel viewed their response to the perceived challenges within the community as vital in shaping their students to be successful, not only in the educational arena, but also in the larger society. Specific challenges school staff identified were high residential mobility, low-income family

conditions, and a lack of male role models. Using family language was a primary mode employed by teachers to care for their students. Family language promoted connections within the classroom, indicated lines of authority, and in some cases, created an “alternate” family to that which students experienced at home. Men were recruited in part to serve as proxies for fathers; this research, however, cautions against viewing men teachers as a panacea, and instead calls for the critical examination of their involvement. In sum, teachers’ and administrators’ responses to the needs of the students were shaped and complicated by district and state policies, social class differences between teachers and families, and ideas about gender roles.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“What are we as a nation, a culture, a society going to do about the children who are being left behind?”

This question, posed by Jane Roland Martin (1992), remains an urgent question in the United States at the beginning of the 21st Century. Despite Horace Mann’s great hopes for education serving as “the balance wheel of the social machinery”, we have fallen short of providing a quality education for all children. Race, ethnicity, class and gender each serve as boundary lines in the geography of educational inequality. Volumes of sociological research indicate educational disparities along these lines; in particular, decades of research indicate the persistent educational inequalities between African American and white students (see Hallinan, 2001 for an overview).

There are several dimensions in the answer to how we can educate all children – not just those from privileged social classes, or those who are white. Some researchers focus on pedagogical techniques. Others focus on school testing and accountability. These are not my focus. I explore the piece of the puzzle that addresses the larger context of education. Children are educated within a context of the family, school and community. How the school and families relate can influence children’s educational experiences.

Often scholars focus on how the family and community can serve as partners to support the school in its endeavor to teach children. A large body of research focuses on this parental involvement in education, which includes everything from maintaining a supportive environment in the home, volunteering at school, assisting children in selecting courses, and serving in governance positions at the school (see Epstein, 1995 for further description of various types of parental involvement in education). Much of this research focuses on what the parents do or do not do in relation to the school. There is much debate about what kind of parental involvement in education really matters. Other research asserts that many teachers also make assumptions about whether parents care about the education of their children based on the kinds and amount of parental involvement activities. In essence, those parents who do not (or cannot) cooperate with the school are sometimes perceived as “uncaring”.

In this dissertation, I focus not on the parents, but on the teachers and school. I explore how the school staff see their role as reaching out and responding to the community and family, rather than an explicit focus on increasing parental involvement with the school. The responsibility for the parent-school relationship does not rest solely with the parents; rather, the school helps set the tone and parameters for parents to be involved. While the school at the center of this research would like to increase parental participation, the principal and many of the teachers place an emphasis on assisting the family and community in the goal of socializing

the children. They view this as especially important, given their position in a community facing many challenges.

Part of how teachers, students and families interact is shaped by race and ethnicity. In the quest to educate all children, some scholars have turned their attention to the differences between the culture of teachers and students. A mismatch between teacher, student and family cultures can create misunderstandings, and students may experience problems in school. The cultural difference theory points out the potential problems; the implication is that teachers who share the students' culture, or who are at least sensitive to and educated about the students' home cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994), will help students have more positive educational experiences. The school in this case study embraces this approach; the principal sought to hire African American teachers to match the majority African American student body.

I use data collected during two and a half years in the life of Clark Elementary¹, a predominately African American school. Because nearly all of the teachers were African American, this allows for an examination of the diversity within this group of African American teachers. Two other aspects of the school make it a good case for study. First, the school emphasizes reaching out to the community. The principal saw herself as not only educating the students in her charge, but also the families. Second, the principal's deliberate recruitment of African American men teachers created a unique case for incorporating both women

¹ This name, and all names used throughout, are pseudonyms.

and men teachers' understanding about their responses to students' families and surrounding community. The large number of African American men elementary school teachers is very rare – there are few men elementary school teachers in general, and even fewer African American men elementary school teachers.

In this dissertation I address three contexts that affected students and their families. These were residential mobility, the low-income and economic instability of many of the families, and the lack of African American men in the families and community who were described as “positive” influences. Each of these situations shaped how the school saw its participation in reaching out to the community. Initially, mobility was my primary focus. The school emphasized mobility as one of their main problems and challenges. School mobility poses a problem for schools in two main ways. One stems from academic consequences for children, especially with curricular gaps as children change schools. The other challenge emerges as the mobility may make it more difficult for teachers and parents to build strong relationships. In addition, parents may lack information about the school if they do not have the opportunity and longevity to find out things such as who the good teachers are or what kinds of programs the school has available.

As I spent more time at the school, what became more interesting was how the school responded to the students, the families and the larger community. Included in this response were their ideas about caring, teacher conceptions of “family”, and specifically the purposeful recruitment of African American men to serve as teachers and proxies for fathers. This dissertation explores the complexity that emerged in the

school's approach. While matching teachers and students by race or culture is an important strategy, school-family interactions are also shaped through the intertwining of district policies, social class and gender.

Background

This section includes a review of previous research which provides background for understanding the context of Clark Elementary, the school at the center of this research. First, I discuss earlier research about school mobility. Various perspectives about caring and its importance at school follows. Finally, I summarize relevant research about African American men as elementary teachers. This chapter ends with a brief overview of the remaining chapters in the dissertation.

Residential mobility and education

Residential mobility is one context which makes the prospect of building family and school relationships more difficult. People in the United States move around; current estimates are that one in six people in the US move each year (GAO, 1994). Family-school partnerships require a certain measure of stability to be successful. Shifting membership creates significant challenges to the formation of fundamental aspects of community. Shared beliefs, meaningful interaction, and other components of community demand continuity (Noddings, 1992).

One body of research suggests that mobility thus presents a serious challenge to schools to the extent that it affects both academic and social relationships. The

consequences ripple from the social psychological effects on the individual child, to the teacher-student relationship, and through the organization of the school. A highly mobile student body magnifies these challenges. Specific challenges to academic achievement include curricular gaps, irregular school attendance, different instructional practices and pace, and placement in incorrect ability groups due to a lack of information about the new student (Kerbow, 1996; Mantzicopoulos and Knutson, 2000).

The timing of residential mobility is also important. Some research focuses on student mobility during high school, with particular attention to the effect on high school drop out (Swanson and Schneider, 1999; Rumberger and Larson, 1998). While this is certainly important, early school experiences can shape these later outcomes. For example, knowledge gaps in the early years of school can compound, possibly leading to academic disengagement or even to grade retention, the results of which may persist over the course of the educational process. Learning to read, for example, is one such essential skill that may suffer with school moves in the younger grades. In addition, young children may lack the maturity to buffer adversity in their home context which may filter into their experiences at schools. Residential mobility during the elementary school years is one early experience that some posit may contribute to eventual school drop out, lower academic achievement and attainment (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 1997; Ensminger and Slusarcick, 1992; Reynolds, 1991; GAO, 1994; Nelson, Simoni and Adelman, 1996). Some research finds that residential mobility for young children (ages 4-7) is *more* detrimental in terms of

likelihood of dropping out of school than moves during the teen years (Haveman, Wolfe, and Spaulding, 1991). Academic attainment and achievement as well as the social relationships which support learning are placed at risk with increased mobility (Tucker, Marx & Long, 1998; Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 1996). Recent research confirms the importance of high academic expectations in conjunction with stable, supportive relationships (Lee and Smith, 1999).

Other research, in contrast, finds that after controlling for student backgrounds, school mobility and achievement are not correlated (Heinlein and Shinn, 2000; Mantzicopoulos and Knutson, 2000). These findings support two earlier longitudinal studies of mobility which also found no connection between incidences of mobility and lower academic achievement once prior achievement is controlled (Schaller, 1976; Blane, Pilling and Fogelman, 1985). Another study of high school students found no relationship between student mobility and various outcomes such as depression, social support and participation in extracurricular activities (Norford and Medway, 2002).

These studies suggest that mobility is an indicator of an already existing condition. The challenges associated with mobile children are a result of students' individual and family characteristics rather than something specifically associated with moving to a new school. Poverty is often intimately linked with higher incidences of residential mobility. Not only a migrant population issue, very low or inconsistent income often results in families more likely to have to move – perhaps in

with other family members, or to a less expensive apartment. The connection between poverty and residential mobility has led some to argue that the negative effects of residential mobility are really the result of the poverty which preceded the move. However, recent longitudinal research indicates that holding level of poverty constant, residential mobility does have a small negative effect on school outcomes (Pribesh and Downey, 1999).

One explanation for this negative effect relates to the social relationships between teachers, students and their families. Changing schools disrupts relationships and supportive adult contact and also access to certain kinds of information. It also requires adjustment to a new environment and new teachers, school rules and expectations. Mobility complicates school-family interaction since it requires the building of new relationships. This directly conflicts with the need for continuity which is an essential element of facilitating caring relationships:

In order to build a caring community, students need continuity in their school residence. They should stay in one school building for longer than two or three years. Children need time to settle in, to become responsible for their physical surroundings, to take part in maintaining a caring community. (Noddings, 1992:66)

In addition to the continuity of place, Noddings also concludes that caring is nurtured in continuities of purpose, people, and curriculum.

For Noddings, the ideal is having teachers and students paired for two to three years at a minimum; at Clark Elementary, and many other urban schools, it is not uncommon for some children to be at the school for only a few months. Pribesh and Downey (1999) find that the majority of the difference between the movers and the

non-movers can be attributed to differences between those groups prior to the move. So, those that do move were already more likely not to have the same educational experience as those who remained stable. This means that those who move are perhaps especially in need of supportive and caring relationships with teachers – but the ones least likely to have that type of connection or forge it easily.

Research about how residential mobility shapes the school environment often includes recommendations about easing the transition for new students. Some suggest that schools provide information packets to new families, and include children in developing welcome and departure rituals for new students (Cohen, 1994; Jalongo, 1994). After school homework centers and school social work services are additional recommendations (Lisella and Serwatka, 1996; Dupper and Halter, 1994). Other suggestions include the use of parent education programs and handbooks, school welcoming committees and in-service training for teachers, maintaining high expectations for all students (Rumberger, et al., 1999; Druin, 1986; Neuman, 1988; Ortner, 1994). For the most part, discrete materials such as written information or one-time events, like a home visit, are the focus. While these may help facilitate the beginnings of home-school communication, it is important to focus attention on the ongoing relationships that ideally occur between teachers and students in the classroom, since that is the primary relationship which mobile students have in the school setting.

Caring as response

Two primary themes emerged about responding to the needs of the students and their families. The first was about the importance placed on the need for teachers to be caring. For education to be effective, teachers and other school personnel must exhibit care for students. Especially at the younger levels, this connection between teaching and caring seems almost “natural” to many teachers. For example, in a study of preservice and in-service teachers, teachers mentioned caring more often than any other in terms of what makes teachers effective (Perry and Rog, 1992). In part this is due to the historical connection since the 1800s between maternal images and teaching young children (Blount, 2000; Hansot, 1993). At Clark Elementary caring was also talked about as one of the most important elements of the school. The second theme related to the creation and recreation of a “family” at school. Many teachers drew on the othermothering tradition within part of African American culture, in which other women in the communities, who may or may not be biologically related to the child, assist in the work of parenting. In addition to this approach, the principal went a step further to recreate a certain type of family by recruiting African American men to serve as teachers. In this next section I examine previous research which lays a foundation and context for understanding and exploring these themes.

Why is caring important in the educational sphere?

After the family, school is arguably the most influential arena of social relationships for children. Besides delivering academic instruction, there is a large body of research dedicated to the importance of the social environment of schools. The caring relationship formed between teachers and students has been posited as a vital component of helping students experience education in positive ways (Noddings 1984,1992; See also Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

There are several broad strands of thought which address the importance of caring in the educational realm. One is that caring can produce moral children. The results of an effective character education will in turn result in a more ethical and caring society (Noddings, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Noblit, 1993; Kohn, 1991; Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon, 1997; Lickona, 1989; Lipsitz, 1995). For example, Alfie Kohn (1991) cites Martin Buber who says “education worthy of the name is essentially education of character” (1939: 104). In this line of thinking, teaching should be about producing good people, not just good learners. To do this, schools should promote various prosocial behaviors.

Another reason caring is important is due to its connection to educational achievement. Coming out of the effective schools literature in the 1970s and 1980s, one aspect of creating achievement was the concept of school as community, where shared values, a common agenda of high academic standards and emotional connections were present (Larrivee, 2000). Many researchers report a relationship between caring teachers and positive academic student outcomes, either measured by

grades or test scores (for example, see Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Battistich and Horn, 1997; Sickle and Spector, 1996; Pang, Rivera and Mora, 1999). In this line of thought, trusting relationships between teachers and students are the foundation of school climates. Two decades ago Lawrence-Lightfoot suggested the idea of “protective caring” in which students feel safe, both physically and psychologically. In this kind of environment learning can occur because the lower-level needs of safety and security are ensured (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983).

A third strand of research contends that caring is especially important for low-income, disadvantaged students. Some explicitly frame the school as one of the few places, if not the only place, for certain students to receive caring attention which they may lack in their homes (Schaps, Battistich and Solomon, 1997; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993). Others more broadly discuss the need to make up for changing neighborhoods and families and the need to address social problems (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1997; Martin, 1992). Noddings explains that schools are interested in community building in part due to the decrease in “community” in larger society. Schools become places to provide what neighborhoods and parents do not or cannot provide – a sense of belonging, caring for one another, participating in a tradition. In other words, there is a loss of “communities of memory” (Bellah et al., 1985) which the school can recreate in part through caring relationships.

The education and socialization of children occurs within the overlapping spheres of family, school and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Epstein, 1995). This point was brought home in a recent symposium entitled “Strengthening the

Black family”, held in Florida in February 2004.² African American scholars, educators and community leaders, including Cornel West, Marva Collins, Jawanza Kunjufu, Orlando Patterson and James Comer, came together to discuss various issues within their community, including the state of education for African American children. A main theme was the importance of the school, community and family working together to educate the children. Caring and a broad view of sharing responsibility for students were emphasized as vital to the educational process. Participants were challenged to return to their communities and identify a child (not related biologically) to care for, encourage and help prepare for success and achievement. The importance of the African American community, in contrast to individual parents, in raising children was emphasized, and viewed as a necessary part of assisting African American children to confront the challenges and succeed in the midst of living in a racist society. This approach has been used in African American communities, in part a legacy of West African culture, but also a response to the assault on the nuclear family unit. The ravages of slavery, the northern migration, and the trend of single-parent female-headed households each resulted in African American families that did not necessarily contain a mother, father and child living in the same household.

² This symposium was broadcast by C-SPAN on February 28, 2004.
<http://inside.c-spanarchives.org:8080/cspan/fullschedule.csp?timeid=211944718706>

What is care?

Like the term “community”, care is slippery word. Chaskin and Rauner (1995) said it well: “To the academic ear the word itself seems soft, lacking in precision and without boundaries, and therefore not a very useful guide for investigation” (p. 670). Many would concede that while defining the term is a difficult task, care remains a very important arena of study. Among these voices is Mayeroff whose 1971 book *On Caring* provides the following definition: “To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself” (p. 1). Caring includes devotion and responding affirmatively to the needs of the other. In addition, the other’s development is connected to the carer’s sense of well-being. Yet, Mayeroff contends, caring is not about dominating or imposing direction.

Nel Noddings (1984) notes different kinds of caring – *caring for* and *caring about*. She also examines the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. Noddings makes it clear that care is not to be confused with warm, fuzzy feelings. Noddings emphasizes the role of action while she acknowledges that “an attitude of warm acceptance and trust is important in all caring relationships”(p. 65). Caring goes beyond feeling to include engrossment, action and reciprocity. Engrossment refers to conveying regard and desire for the other’s well-being (p. 19). Action is “directed toward the welfare, protection, or enhancement of the care for the other” (p. 23). Reciprocity means that care that is not received by the other is not really true care. If the cared-for does not accept or acknowledge the action as care, then the

action is not reciprocal. This does not mean that the cared-for has to verbally respond to the caring action, but it has to be accepted and defined as a caring action.

Noddings views caring as residing within a relationship; caring is not merely a feeling or idea that an individual has about something we can do for someone else. In this approach, which she calls “caring as virtue”, the caring resides in the individual and stems from that person’s own experiences and perspective. This approach is not true caring in that it does not apprehend the cared-for. In the context of education, this would mean that teachers cannot be caring without getting to know the individual students and their experiences. Responding with care does not follow a cookie-cutter formula, but requires a unique relationship between teacher and student.

About the same time as Noddings, another feminist scholar reinterpreted the role of education. Jane Roland Martin, in *Schoolhome* (1992), envisions schools which recapture the domestic sphere and emphasize care, concern and connection. This vision of school is in response to what she sees as both the denigration and disappearance of the domestic sphere. She draws on the Montessori model of turn-of-the 20th century Italy in which children experienced the absence of parents who were working in the factories. With the lack of adult supervision many of the children were misbehaving and this prompted Maria Montessori to start schools for the children, in which they could receive during the day at school what they were not receiving in their homes due to the absence of their parents. Martin argues that children today are also experiencing a “domestic vacuum” in large part due to the shift of industrialization and the necessity for more and more mothers (as well as

fathers) to work outside the home. She acknowledges that the family form with a male breadwinner and a mother at home was a fleeting experience in United States history, lasting at most only a few decades. This radical shift in family experience, therefore, requires a reformulation of the school system whose main foundation is care.

Her ideal school, therefore, should be “a sanctuary, a haven – in contrast to the ‘stark reality’ of student’s home lives” (p. 209). Although there is no single formula for creating schoolhomes, she encourages adults in schools to “think small, think locally, think experimentally and never forget the domestic vacuum in children’s lives today” (p. 210). Above all, these schools should be characterized by care, concern and connection – teachers and other adults forming nurturing relationships with students. As a result, the common core of the schoolhome should consist mainly of attitudes, skills and values, in contrast to specific bodies of knowledge such as found in Hirsch’s (1987) list for cultural literacy or in the current trend of valuing standardized test results as the highest good in the educational process.

Another layer of relationships beyond the interpersonal caring suggested by Noddings and Martin is what Siddle Walker (1996) calls institutional caring. This is the combination of the interpersonal care with supportive school structures: “The school as an institution identifies the academic, social, or psychological needs of students and through its policy arranged for those needs to be met. Caring thus [is] personal, relational, and situational, and it [is] concurrently supported by the

structured response of the institution to the needs of students.” (Siddle Walker, 1996: 216-217) Institutional caring, then, considers the multiple needs of students and addresses those concerns at a school level. The teacher remains of primary importance, but this approach considers how the larger school structure can help or hinder the kind of caring in which the teacher can engage. This is essential as it moves beyond individual teachers and students to an assessment of how the social contexts and policy environments of schools are a force in shaping interpersonal interactions.

Shifting the focus: a different caring theory

The vast majority of research about caring focuses on classrooms with white teachers. In part, this is due to the predominance of white teachers, especially at the elementary level (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Much less attention is paid to multi-cultural or non-anglo social contexts. A small body of research, however, delves into caring in African-American schools. Some investigate segregated schools of the past, taking note of the positive aspects which occurred in these all-African American institutions. The care and concern felt by the students as expressed by their African-American teachers figures largely in these accounts (Siddle Walker, 1993, 1996; Morris and Morris, 2000).

One aspect of caring for African American students includes using culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Hale, 2001). Ladson-Billings describes a type of interpersonal caring in her profiles of successful teachers of

African American students (1994). Her culturally relevant pedagogy contains three main propositions which “contribute to success for all students, especially African American students”: 1) successful teachers focus on students’ academic achievement, 2) successful teachers develop students’ cultural competence and 3) successful teachers foster students’ sense of sociopolitical consciousness. Hale’s (2001) conception of culturally appropriate pedagogy emphasizes “cultural salience in teaching, curricular materials and assignments” and providing cultural enrichment via the school organizing the community and families to plan various experiences for the students (p.147). Hale’s approach explicitly acknowledges that schools must take into account the demographic reality that especially for inner-city African American families, many will not have the luxury of parents who have time to participate at the school in the same ways as middle-class white women. Instead of bemoaning this difference, she suggests that schools create an “instructional accountability infrastructure” in which the school and teachers act *in loco parentis*, particularly when a parent refuses to respond to a child’s school failure (p. 140). For both Ladson-Billings and Hale, the manner in which these propositions are applied require a teacher who cares and takes the time to consider individual needs of the students. A combination of high expectations and supportive social relationships enhances students’ educational experiences. As part of providing a supportive environment, these adults help students negotiate a racialized world.

These descriptions of caring in African American schools are an important counter-example to universalistic descriptions of caring. This point is made

forcefully by Audrey Thompson (1998), who sets forth a critique of what she calls the “colorblindness” of caring theory. Thompson argues that caring theory, particularly the theories of Noddings and Martin, are universalistic and ignore a Black feminist perspective. First, Thompson sets up caring theory as being played out in a private space – away from the “politically charged public sphere” – and often modeled on an idealized mother’s love for her children. She labels most mainstream caring theories as liberal in their orientation, meaning that they “tend to address social issues such as racial and gender inequality as problems to be solved by effecting more sensitive adjustments of institutions to individuals and groups.” In contrast, leftist theories “critique prevailing institutions (including, in many cases, the traditional family structure) as themselves being among the organizing causes of social inequities” (p. 527). Some objections by leftists to the ethics of care are the lack of attention to power within the caring relationship, essentialism in attributing an ethic of care to women in general³, deficit assumptions informing educational theories of care that offer to provide children of color with the kind of support supposedly not found in their homes, and a disregard for politically oppressive functions to which caring has been put. In sum, “leftist critics have objected to caring theories’ ahistoricism, cultural bias, and obliviousness to systemic power relations.” (p. 527)

Thompson asserts that colorblindness in caring theory is apparent in several ways. The first is that white girls and women are taken to be the foundational

³ Noddings would most likely disagree with this analysis of her work. She acknowledges that women have historically been associated with caring practices, but this does not preclude men from participating in caring.

category, against which other groups are compared, or vary. And, the theories of care are often linked to a “white, middle-class ethic of domestic well-being” (p. 529). (For example, Jane Roland Martin’s *Schoolhome* is intended to create the “moral equivalent of the home” and therefore features a “domestic curriculum” (Martin, 1992: 33). She also writes that white researchers have tended to look for the culturally white practices and values that are already recognized as caring – instead of looking for a radical rethinking of the assumptions that have guided previous research.

Black feminist theories of care, in contrast, do not glorify the home – the home is not necessarily a “haven in a heartless world”. Racism, poverty, having to clean other people’s homes, and watch other people’s children creates a social context in which women of color’s time is divided between their own families and the families of white women (see also Eugene, 1989; Collins, 1991). The consequence – that caring in the Black family had to be about the surrounding society, so that the children could learn how to understand and survive racism (Thompson, 1998: 532). “Caring in the Black community is not understood as compensatory work meant to remedy the shortcomings of justice, as in the ‘haven in the heartless world’ model. Instead, caring means bringing about justice for the next generation, and justice means creating the kinds of conditions under which all people can flourish.” In light of this, caring is not only emotional labor – but also political labor, physical labor, and intellectual labor (as in the work of educational uplift). (Thompson, 1998: 533).

Within this perspective, idealized versions of affectionate mother love may be inappropriate, depending on the situations enumerated above, with many African

American mothers out of necessity having to divert attention away from their own families. The tradition of “othermothering” (Collins, 1991; Eugene, 1989) is not just a stopgap method to make up for a lack of mothering in a particular home, and thus a “second-best” approximation of mothering. Instead it is an honored tradition with roots in West Africa in which childrearing is shared, even when biological mothers are present. In this sense, othermothering is not only about caring for children, but also helps create adult and community relationships.

Thompson continues by offering various educational implications. The first is an anti-racist curriculum which goes beyond Black history month. With nearly every promoter of what “care” means, she notes the importance of knowing the whole child, but expands that to include not only the individual academic and family situation, but also the cultural histories and political situations of students. Without cognizance of these pressures, the eradication of them will prove impossible. Like those offering culturally relevant or appropriate pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hale, 2001), Thompson suggests that teachers and students need to become versed in a variety of cultural narratives, different modes of telling and acquainted with cultural context from which particular cultural narratives emerge (p. 542). In addition, whiteness should not be the “neutral” position. Finally, teachers who care need to help students develop strategies for survival – similar to helping students develop a sense of sociopolitical consciousness in Ladson-Billings’ work. Throughout, an openness to explore new views should permeate the caring educational enterprise, in contrast to an (unexamined) reliance on past educational practices.

Caring is important in part because it provides the relationship out of which can flow justice. The caring relationship provides the framework for the teacher to see what the needs are, and then the justice can come from that. Pang, Rivera and Mora (1999), along similar lines as Thompson, critique Noddings in that her ethic of caring does little to address social and cultural oppression. They argue that we need care and the importance of culture to create an educational environment which shows students how to address social justice (and injustice). This connects with aspects of Ladson-Billings culturally relevant pedagogy, one part of which is to help students confront the unjust situations of the world (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001).

Creating family at school: the quest for “otherfathers”

It is important to consider men teachers because their presence is often prized in the school setting, yet they are the minority, especially at the younger grades. In this study, I focus on African American men elementary teachers, who are rarely found in most schools. While few in number, this is an important group, especially in light of the concern with the educational experiences of African American boys.

African American boys and male mentors

The principal of the elementary school in this case study aggressively recruited African American men as classroom teachers and other school staff. This stemmed from the administrators’ and teachers’ shared concern with the low achievement of the African American boys in previous years. Various researchers

have proffered explanations for why this may occur (See Ogbu, 1992; Steele, 1997; Majors and Billson, 1992; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Two explanations for why African American boys are especially at risk in the educational setting are the cultural difference theory and cultural discontinuity theory. The cultural difference theory states that differences in language and interaction styles lead to mistrust between teachers and students (see Erickson, 1982; 1984; 1987). This mistrust can create an environment hostile to the achievement of students not from the dominant culture (see for example Hale, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Majors, 2001; Shujaa, 1994). The cultural discontinuity theory makes the argument that African Americans are “involuntary minorities” who may be hesitant to embrace mainstream approaches to school success, since they many not see many examples of how the educational system has worked for other African Americans. In response, there is no “buy-in” to the educational system, and achievement suffers (Ogbu 1982, 1983, 1987). Suggestions for counteracting both mistrust as well as “disidentification” include having male role models or mentors, and more radical approaches such as all male schools or classrooms (Osborne, 2001; Davis, 2001; Majors, Wilkinson & Gulam, 2001; Kunjufu, 1983; Ascher, 1992).

Because the student-teacher relationship is central, it follows that recruiting male African American teachers would be a step beyond the incorporation of mentors and tutors. Some evidence by African American middle school boys about the significance of their teachers lends support to the potential importance of this approach (Davis, 2001). The call for male teachers in the early elementary grades is

not new. For example, Kunjufu (1986) in part explains the educational problems of African American males as stemming from the lack of male teachers. Holland (1989), in a publication aimed to teachers and principals, notes “students – especially boys – who fail to complete high school drop out psychologically and emotionally by the 3rd or 4th grade” (p.88). He suggests that male mentors are necessary because boys will not accept their women teachers as models, instead connecting school with “femininity”. In a similar vein, Cunningham (1993) suggests that African American male adults in leadership roles are needed not only to enhance academic and social development, but also to “counter inappropriate sex-role socialization, and lessen maladaptive identity formation”. This approach, however, has been criticized as simplistic because it places too much emphasis on the contribution of male teachers teaching “maleness”. Implicit in this requirement for men to teach males is that too much “femaleness” is bad, replaying echoes of the villainized African American single mother (see Sewell, 1997).⁴

Male teachers in a female occupation

Despite such critiques, recruiting African American males to serve as mentors and teachers holds sway as an important endeavor. Incorporating more African American male teachers is a challenge, however, as the vast majority of current

⁴ Sewell is not making the argument that having male teachers cannot be positive, but that an over-emphasis on gender ignores the complexity of how students experience the educational process.

elementary school teachers as well as those in schools of education preparing to be teachers are white women. In the mid 1990s, for example, those enrolled in teacher education programs in the U.S. were 86% white and only 7% were African American (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). The number of men teachers of all ethnic backgrounds hovers around 20% for the elementary grades, but African American men comprise just under 2% of the total elementary teacher population.⁵ Within Texas, recent figures are most likely slightly lower, with 2.1% African American men teachers in Kindergarten through 12th grade.⁶ Typically, men of all races are clustered in the older grades, making men elementary school teachers the rarest group.

Previous research about men in female-dominated occupations points out both advantages and disadvantage men encounter. Male elementary teachers face several disadvantages for entering the profession. Low pay is a large dissuading factor (Galbraith, 1992). Men face the contradiction of being hired for their maleness, yet find themselves constrained in the expression of certain types of behaviors closely related to the work of teaching small children for fear of being accused of pedophilia (Sargent, 2000).

⁵ 1990 Census: Detailed Occupation by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex
<http://censtats.census.gov/cgi-bin/eeo/eejobs.pl>

⁶ PEIMS data, 2002, State Board for Educator Certification Report “Number of Texas Teachers by Intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Sex (1995-2002)”. www.sbec.state.tx.us

Despite these disadvantages, men also may encounter certain advantages as they enter female-dominated occupations. Williams (1995), in her study of men who worked in nontraditional occupations (elementary teachers, nurses, librarians and social workers), explored the meaning of masculinity and femininity and how these meanings result in patterns of inequality. Once the men enter nontraditional occupations they sometimes find themselves on a “fast track”, what Williams calls “the glass escalator.” Ideas about masculinity led to men being pushed up the career ladder in part because “ambition” is viewed as a masculine trait. If the men did not exhibit ambition, they were suspect and those traits at times were pushed on to them. She found that there was often institutional pressure for the men to move up; the men may have not desired this, but there were pressures from others which she argues comes from the meanings attached to gender.

Clark Elementary provides an opportunity to consider race and ethnicity and how that shapes the negotiation of masculinity within the elementary school setting. This is important, especially with the perceptions of African American men as “hyper masculine” and “dangerously masculine” which abound in the media and our society (see Ferguson, 2000, for an example of how African American boys are perceived as “dangerous” in the school setting, even at young ages). L. Williams and Villemez (1993) note that the incorporation of minority men into female-dominated occupations may follow a different pattern from white men, especially in light of blocked opportunity and discrimination. Because the social location of white men and African American men is so disparate, it follows that the meaning of working in an

elementary school should be explored from the vantage point of African American men. This will allow a perspective of how African American men teachers perceive their role, how they “care”, and how they view race as shaping their experience in the elementary school setting.

In occupations such as child care or elementary teaching, caring is perceived as an essential part of successfully fulfilling the job. This caring is often linked to women, specifically to women as maternal and nurturing. Coltrane and Galt (2000) make the argument that male dominance and care work are “mutually forged and reciprocally reproduced” (p. 3). Caring is linked with gender because women have historically provided the care, while men have been the willing recipients of care work. Like Martin (1992), they point out the social and historical conditions that have shaped this separation of the spheres as men left the home for work, while (some) women were able to stay at home in the domestic realm. Yet Coltrane and Galt point out that this is too reductive. There were other movements about fatherhood that have emphasized or de-emphasized the role of the father. In recent years they point to the calls for fathers to be head of the family as noted in the work of Popenoe (1996) and Blankenhorn (1995). The teachers at Clark subscribe in large part to this view. The absence of this pattern of father-headed families is reflected in the need for African American male teachers to attempt to fill this void. Both women and men teachers talked about this specific need.

Other research also points out that female-dominated occupations may pose a threat to a man’s sense of masculinity (Williams, 1995; Bradley, 1993; Allan, 1993,

Sargent, 2000; Carrington, 2002). This presents a possible point of tension as male teachers are desired in the school setting, yet elementary schools as a whole continue to be largely female institutions characterized by caring. Lawrence-Lightfoot makes the case that for masculine leadership to be “non-caricatured” it has to include traditionally feminine characteristics such as “nurture, receptivity, responsiveness to relationship and context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983:25). Clark Elementary, because of its successful recruitment of African American men elementary teachers, presents a unique opportunity to examine how these teachers both think about and enact caring in their position as teachers of young children.

Organization of Chapters

The social relationships between teachers and students, and teachers and students’ families both shape and are shaped by the context of the school. In this dissertation, I explore the situation in the community and the school which influence the perception that teachers need to be especially caring as well as the need to recreate a sense of family. In other words, we can use the sociological imagination to see how the “personal and individual” nature of caring and relationship intersects with the “public pressures” which come from working within a profession which dictates care an important element of the job, as well as external pressures from the state accountability tests and other district policies. Furthermore, we begin to understand caring within an African American school set within a long history of inequality for African American students.

This is not a portrait of an “exemplary” school that has achieved dramatic success. Nor is it an example of a “failing” school from which we presumably learn lessons of what to avoid. Rather, it is a school that faces many of the same challenges that confront other inner-city schools. It is a school somewhere in the middle, in which we can see the tensions inherent in the educational process, and how the teachers and staff at Clark Elementary negotiate within their particular context.

Clark Elementary, the school at the center of this study, is a school experiencing *de facto* segregation, with 85% African American students, 14% Latino/a students and 3% white, Asian and Native American. While the majority of elementary teachers in the United States are white, this is not the case at Clark Elementary, where the majority of teachers identify as Black or African-American. Studying a school with mostly African American teachers allows the opportunity to explore the diversity *within* African American teachers, instead of being relegated to studying a few African American teachers in a mostly white context. In other words, African American teachers are not a homogeneous group. The particular case of Clark provides an even more unique opportunity to examine the roles of African American men teachers, who are indeed a relatively rare occurrence in the elementary school setting. Through this focus on the diversity among African American teachers, we can begin also to explore how class factors in to teachers’ perceptions of care for students, attention to which is necessary to understand the complexities of caring within social contexts other than that of middle-class white women. As Collins (1991) points out, the intersecting spheres of race, class and gender should not

be ignored, especially in the analysis of school relationships between teachers, students and their families.

Much of the previous literature focuses on the philosophical debates about caring. Others delve into the historical practices of African American teachers during segregation. Another body of research highlights the problems and challenges of the mostly white female teaching force trying to teach students of color (for example, Hale, [2001] for a negative view; Ladson-Billings [2001] for a hopeful perspective on the possibilities). This research places African American teachers at the forefront. Chapter 2 outlines the methods and some of the methodological issues I confronted while studying Clark Elementary. An overview of the school follows in Chapter 3, in which I describe the history and milieu of the school.

I use three challenges that confronted the students and their families as a scaffold for the next chapters. In Chapter 4, I examine the challenge of student mobility. Clark Elementary has a high student mobility rate – something becoming increasingly common in schools across the United States, and especially in low-income urban areas. Much of the research about student mobility and educational outcomes focuses on specific academic problems or on social disruptions which result from school moves. School staff at Clark Elementary spoke about both of these dimensions of school mobility. The focus in this dissertation is not to assess the magnitude of these phenomena, or to determine which one is more important. Instead, I examine the social construction of mobility. In other words, how do teachers understand the contours of student mobility? What shapes their perception

of mobility as a problem confronting their school? Despite the shared understanding that student mobility is one of the biggest challenges facing Clark, teachers' responses to the mobility on the surface seems puzzling, as specific programs related to mobility are not implemented at the school. In addition, teachers focused on the perceived academic consequences of mobility, while downplaying the social ramifications of students moving from school to school.

Chapter 5 explores teachers' perceptions about the African American family, and specifically, the deficiencies in the students' direct experiences within their families. I examine how the teachers at Clark Elementary talk about caring from their vantage point "in the trenches" with the students in whom they saw multiple needs. I examine the meanings care has for teachers, and also how their ideas about caring are closely linked to the perceptions of students' families. One part of the approach to caring is the use of family imagery which is used at times to create an extended family, in the othermothering tradition of the African American community, while in some cases used to attempt to "make up for" what teachers perceive to be students' deficient families. Social class complicates the relationship between teachers, students and their families. This chapter adds to our understanding of caring and the linkages with the overlapping spheres of school, family and community.

Chapter 6 reflects the concern teachers and administrators shared about the lack of positive African American male role models in the community. Reminiscent of Wilson's (1996) analysis on the inner-city, with the lack of an African American middle class and working professionals to serve as role models, the principal acted by

hiring African American men as teachers. Chapter 6 capitalizes on the large number of African American men teachers at Clark – a unique situation, especially at the elementary school level. Caring is often relegated to the feminine sphere and denigrated. At the same time, caring is seen as an essential component of teaching, especially at the elementary level with young children. I investigate how these African American men understand their position within a teaching profession which is so closely connected with caring. I also consider how the other women teachers view the men's participation at the school. There are costs as well as benefits in the attempt to create a certain type of family for the students at Clark Elementary. Trade-offs include making the decision to hire men teachers who are not certified, in exchange for the presence of men at the school, as well as some stereotypical gender roles which are recreated and reinforced for student consumption.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodological Approach

In this chapter I describe the methods used for this study. This includes the site and duration of the research and details about data collection, including sections about the interviews, participant observation and analysis of other records. I conclude with a discussion of three methodological issues I encountered during the course of this research: 1) my connection with a school evaluation research study being conducted concurrently at the school, 2) the tension between outsider and insider statuses, and 3) whites studying African Americans.

Site and duration of research

The site for my study was a pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade school located in a large Texas metropolitan area. (See Chapter 3 for an in-depth description of the school.) Clark Elementary was one of twelve schools selected to serve as case study sites for the Annenberg Challenge Research and Evaluation Study⁷, which examined a certain type of school reform which was implemented in elementary, middle and high schools throughout this metropolitan area. I conducted research at the school from January 2000 through May 2002 for my dissertation as well as for the Research and Evaluation Study.

⁷ Pedro Reyes, Department of Educational Administration, principal investigator.

I met the vice principal and one of the content specialists in January 2000 through a meeting scheduled by the Evaluation Study.⁸ Shortly after, the principal investigator of the case study site and I toured the school and met with the school principal, the vice principal in charge of the reform project, and the content specialist who had primary responsibility for documenting Clark's efforts in implementing the school reform objectives. For the rest of the school semester and through the summer I visited the school periodically, at least once a month. During this time I became familiar with the many programs at Clark, as well as had the opportunity to meet many of the staff and teachers. I also observed at a nearby community center which worked closely with the school. The principal investigator and I conducted a few interviews during this initial period, mostly about topics related to the evaluation study. It was during this time that the emphasis on hiring caring teachers as well as concerns about residential mobility emerged as important topics.

The following year (Fall 2000-Spring 2001) I visited Clark more frequently, at least twice each month. It was during this year that I began to conduct interviews. Many of these visits were overnight trips which allowed me to observe the after school programs as well as evening events for families. Since Clark Elementary was located approximately 150 miles from my home, visiting the school required either a short plane trip or a three hour drive. (I discuss this further in the "Issues" section.)

The distance from my home limited my ability for "spontaneous" attendance at

⁸ Content specialists are experienced teachers who provide curricular support and ideas about a particular subject to the rest of the faculty. Clark had content specialists for reading and language arts, math, science, technology, and for TAAS.

school events. I did my best to gather information and dates for upcoming events of interest. While my research was limited in some ways by the distance, the Research and Evaluation project was very generous in allowing for travel funds, which resulted in many hours spent at Clark over the three year period.

The final year of my research (Fall 2001-Spring 2002) I was at Clark nearly every week, usually twice per week. Staff members joked that they should give me an office. I did have an unofficial office where I conducted interviews or looked through cumulative folders or other school documents. It was a “cave” on the side of the library which afforded privacy, but did not have a door, so also allowed observation of the hallways and happenings in the library. In addition, when people walked by on their way to the cafeteria, teacher’s lounge or front office, I could easily greet and be greeted.

Being at the school so often had its strengths, in that I was able to see the school during all kinds of experiences - “normal” days as well as “special events”, test days, as well as “track and field day”. My presence became more “normal” as I was at Clark so often. In contrast with my initial visits, when I was clearly identified as “the Annenberg” person – I sensed later a greater familiarity and most teachers seemed more relaxed as we got to know each other. I think it also helped that part of my topic of interest was aligned with something that most staff and teachers viewed as a problem facing their school community. They were concerned with residential mobility, and many expressed interest in finding out the results of my study. I think

the situation would have been very different if they thought I was studying their teaching methods.

On the other hand, being at the school so much did not always make getting interviews completed an easy task. Because I was at Clark so much, sometimes teachers felt very comfortable in rescheduling their interviews. In one example, I was getting ready to interview a teacher with whom it had been particularly difficult to arrange a suitable interview time. Just as we were about to begin, another teacher came by and told her to come celebrate a team-member's birthday. The teacher expressed some concern that she was going to have to reschedule with me yet again, and the other teacher said "Oh, don't worry about it! Kelly's here all the time. You can do it later." Of course, I did not want the teacher to have to miss the celebration, and we successfully rescheduled. But I wondered if there is such a thing as being at the school too much!

Data collection

I obtained data using three methods: interviews, participant observation, and collecting existing school records. In addition, I used some information from a teacher survey which was conducted for the school reform evaluation and research project.

Interviews

The interview format allowed the respondents to talk about their own thoughts, feelings and experiences in their own words. My goal, influenced by

symbolic-interaction, was to apprehend the meanings that teachers and other school staff understood about their participation at Clark Elementary. Interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of complex topics; they also allow for the emergence of ideas that have not been determined ahead of time by the researcher. Topics included what teachers thought about the community, how they described caring for students, the strengths and challenges facing the school, their assessment of parental involvement, what it takes to be a “good” teacher of their student population, their experience with the yearly state assessment test, the role of African American teachers at Clark, how residential mobility affects their school and individual classroom and what motivates them to stay in a difficult teaching environment. Since the interviews were semi-structured at times teachers brought up other topics of discussion from those listed above.

I conducted semi-structured open-ended formal interviews with members of several groups at the school: teachers, school administrators, front office personnel, school social service providers and head program staff of the after-school programs for students. The majority of interviews were conducted during the 2001-2002 school year after I had spent considerable time at the school. I interviewed a total of 61 members of the school staff of Clark Elementary; thirteen of these I interviewed again, most because they had so much to say that we did not have enough time to talk about the topics of interest in one interview. I conducted interviews with 37 teachers, one student teacher, nine content specialists and nine social services and other school staff, including the librarian and counselor. I also interviewed five administrative

staff – the principal and three assistant principals (during any school year there were two assistant principals, but each year there were changes in this position). The teachers represented a mix of grade levels (although I focused on grades one through four). The table below lists interview respondents by position, race and sex.

Table 2.1: Interview Respondents by Position, Race and Sex

Position	African American Female	African American Male	White Female	White Male	Other*
Pre-Kindergarten Teacher			1		
Kindergarten Teacher					1
First Grade Teacher	7				
Second Grade Teacher	6	1			
Third Grade Teacher	4	1	2		
Fourth Grade Teacher	4	6			
Student Teacher		1			
Administrator	2	1	1	1	
Fine Arts	1	2	1		
Content Specialist	5		3	1	
Social Service Staff	3	1	1		
Other school staff	2	1			1

* I am purposefully choosing not to provide additional identifying information since it may compromise the confidentiality of the respondents.

I invited teachers and school staff to participate in the interviews in person. This provided an opportunity to explain my research briefly, and set up a time convenient for them on the spot. Through other research at the school connected with the school reform evaluation project, I found this to be the most effective method for setting up interviews. I explained my research interests at the beginning of the interview and explained their right of refusal or termination before the start of the interview. I told each interviewee that if any question made them uncomfortable, they could skip it, or choose to end the interview at any time. In addition, information sheets which included contact information provided a way for respondents to contact me should they have questions at a later date.

The majority of interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Some respondents preferred not to be recorded; in these cases I took notes during and immediately after the interview. Teacher interviews for the most part occurred during the teacher's conference period, which was approximately one hour long. The majority of interviews were conducted in a private room near the school library; a few interviews were conducted in teachers' classrooms while their students were at fine arts classes.

Participant observation

It was important to me to use other data sources to compare what was said in the interviews with what occurred in the "everyday life" at school. I wanted to see the teachers interact with students in the classroom as well as get a feel for group

activities and meetings that included school staff, students and family members. To accomplish this, I observed in various school settings, including classrooms, during the after school programs, special school assemblies, staff meetings, the parent center, the front office (during intakes of new students to the school) and at various school-sponsored events for students and their families. I also observed a homework drop-in center located in a nearby apartment complex which was very close to the school.

Before observing in classrooms I asked permission from the teacher. In a few cases they told me it was “not a good time” and in those cases I returned at a later date. I observed classrooms in part to see the various ways teachers promoted a feeling of community in the midst of student transitions. This included ways teachers help integrate their students when new children arrive, and also how they fostered participation and cooperation throughout the year. I kept a record of my observations as field notes. At times I wrote during the observation, and sometimes afterward, if it seemed that taking notes would be distracting.

While I did occasionally perform minor tasks at the school such as helping to put up a bulletin board, and preparing posters for a special event, I usually did not have an active role in the classrooms or with students. There were a few times when a teacher asked me to “keep an eye on things” in the classroom while he or she took a child or some paperwork to the front office, but these were rare occurrences. In most cases, I sat in the back of classrooms or the auditorium to observe, in an attempt to be as non-intrusive as possible.

Once I had collected my interview transcripts and field notes, I analyzed themes that were present. I first read over my notes and interviews rather quickly, to establish an overview of all the material. I then proceeded more deliberately, taking note of emerging themes. This resulted in an iterative process, in which a discovery at some point resulted in returning to my notes and transcripts to further explore ideas as they appeared to me. I used the NUD*IST qualitative software analysis program only in the very beginning, essentially as a “quick and dirty” approach to finding major categories of text. I found this approach cumbersome, and instead relied on colored pencils, notes in the margins, and the creation of my own “theme sheets” using a more old-fashioned cut-and-paste method.

Analysis of existing records and other school information

I examined “portfolios” that the school had compiled about their efforts related to student and family outreach programs, and their efforts to create a sense of community within the school. These portfolios were written summaries of the programs which teachers and administrators had compiled in conjunction with their participation in the school reform efforts. Other school information I used included monthly newsletters to parents, flyers about school events, and materials distributed during staff meetings. Texas Education Agency (TEA) publicly available data provided additional material to describe the school and district context. I used these

data for information such as mobility rates, racial/ethnic composition of teachers and students, and economic disadvantage of the student population.

I also used school attendance and registration records to help describe more fully the dimensions of and patterns related to student mobility. I also matched TAAS scores of individual students with school attendance records to examine the relationship between them. The principal was very interested in the problem of student mobility at the school and wanted to explore this relationship.

I collected school mobility information for each student on grids, transferring data by hand. Data included dates for school attendance and school moves, whether a student was new to Clark, if the student had ever attended Clark previously and had since returned, previous school retention, and whether the student was considered to be “at risk” by the school. In addition, I collected information about whether the student was “below grade level” as measured by participation in a remedial reading program as well as if they participated in the after-school academic enrichment programs. No one else had access to this data; I kept it in a notebook initially, and then transferred it to a computer file with no names attached.

I compared class lists printed by the registrar with the cumulative folders, tracking down any stray folders. Data for second through fourth grade students were collected in this manner. Information for first grade, kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students were collected through the computer system. In Texas,

Kindergarten is not required, so my analysis focuses on school moves from first through fourth grades. (Remember that Clark only goes through fourth grade.)

This was a painstaking process, complicated by the very situation I was trying to study. When a student came to Clark, there was often a lag of at least two weeks before previous school information was sent to the school. Teachers talked about this lag and the frustration caused by a lack of information about new student in their classroom, which I discuss more fully in Chapter 4. Often, this material never arrived. Without these records, it is impossible to know how many schools the student attended. Sometimes partial information existed, the most common pattern being missing information about the student's earliest schools.

Once I hand-collected the school attendance information, I checked every record with missing data against the computerized district information. If the student had ever attended school within the district, it showed up in this system. This approach helped fill in some of the holes from the material in the cumulative folders, but did not help with information about students who attended school outside of Greene ISD.

For these records I was able to determine a minimum amount of mobility. For example, I was able to ascertain that a student attended at least two other schools, but I have no way of knowing if it was only two, or whether the student had attended more and the records never made it into the cumulative folder. I flagged these records and kept them separate from the students whose entire school trajectory could be determined. I suspect that it is this group of students who may have the highest

mobility. For example, consider a fourth grade student who we know attended at least one other school but is missing information for several years of school. It is just as likely that they attended ONLY that one other school and the records are simply missing. The only way to know definitively would be to ask each parent, which was not feasible as part of this study.

Since the focus of my research rests on the qualitative understanding gained from interviewing teachers and observing in the school setting, this missing data is not as crucial. While it is important to incorporate this data for triangulation purposes, the main point of my research is not an intensive quantitative analysis. In other words, my aim was not to prove or disprove whether a certain amount of school mobility affects a student's TAAS scores. Even if this were my point, I did not have sufficient controls to complete this analysis. For example, I did not have access to information about students' prior achievement, nor did I have individual-level data about socioeconomic status, both of which would be important to include as controls in determining any effects of mobility (see for example, Pribesh and Downey, 1999). For this reason, I rely on a presentation of cross-tabulations to provide some measure of triangulation to accompany teacher accounts. The patterns revealed in this data, including the missing data, both support and contradict various teachers' perceptions about mobility, which is the more important and interesting point.

Teacher Survey

A brief written teacher survey was administered during spring 2000 during a teacher's professional development meeting. This survey was primarily designed to collect information for the school reform evaluation and research study, however, some of the open-ended questions were relevant to my dissertation. In particular, information about contact with parents, and their assessment of the strengths and challenges facing Clark were helpful in sensitizing me to some general perceptions which I then explored more fully.

Methodological issues

As I conducted my research, I confronted several points of tension which arose due to the nature of qualitative research. Heavily dependent on interpersonal communication, and rife with the possibilities for miscommunication, conducting qualitative research requires reflection about situations which may influence the research process. In this next section I consider three issues I encountered while studying Clark Elementary. These were 1) my connection to an evaluation project, 2) outsider/insider status, and 3) the tensions connected to whites studying African Americans.

Connection with school reform evaluation

My role as researcher and evaluator no doubt influenced how the teachers and school staff perceived me (see Gartrell 1991). This was especially true in the beginning, as my role was linked explicitly with evaluation of the reform efforts during initial introductions by the principal. Some teachers and staff initially thought that I could secure grant money for their pet projects, telling me about the athletic equipment they thought would benefit the school, or about certain software to add to the computer labs. The primary risk to the research is that teachers or other school personnel would try to sweet talk me in an effort to present the school in a certain way, with hopes of gaining something tangible for the students. Over time, and with repeated clarification, it became clear that I had no such pull. At times my connection with the reform effort was confusing, as staff tried to figure out exactly who I was and what I was doing at their school. As I continued to visit the school over the course of two and a half years, I would like to think that the teachers saw me also as a researcher interested in other topics apart from the school reform and as someone who cared about education. These requests for funding only occurred early on, and in most interviews, teachers and staff were quite forthcoming about problems they experienced at the school, which would not support the idea that they were presenting a sugar-coated view due to a faulty understanding of my role. In fact, many teachers were quick to criticize the very programs which had been implemented as part of the school reform program. To further protect against misinterpretation, when I conducted interviews related to my dissertation, I verbally clarified my

position and that our conversation was not connected to the school reform evaluation. This dual role was tricky, and one I would hope to avoid or minimize in future research.

Outsider/Insider

Besides being initially seen as an evaluator, my outsider status was highlighted in other ways, marked most obviously by my white skin, but also by not living in the metropolitan area where the school is located, as well as my alliance with a university, rather than having direct experience as a teacher. In contrast, there were points of connection which varied with the particular person I was interviewing. One of the things I had in common with all the teachers was a familiarity with teaching from having grandparents, two parents and a brother who are teachers. Even though I did not experience teaching at the elementary level for myself, I could certainly understand (from hearing about it firsthand at the dinner table frequently) about what a hard and underappreciated job it is, with little monetary compensation. I also was able to connect with several of the teachers over our shared graduate school status: we could commiserate and share our experiences, which helped break the ice.

These kinds of insider/outsider tensions are an inevitable part of all qualitative inquiry. It helped (and was necessary) that the principal was supportive of my presence at the school, and the staff as a whole was welcoming, both formally during interviews, and informally, when I would see them in the halls or at various school programs. Although some teachers did seem to be giving me “party line” responses

at times, the majority shared a variety of thoughts and opinions about the school, their experiences and teaching practices which did not seem like they were “putting their best foot forward” for me.

Jay McLeod (1995), author of *Ain't No Makin' It*, writes about the challenges he faced in his research, and some “turning points” where he felt a change in the level of acceptance from the groups of boys he was studying. I, too, experienced similar “turning points”. One occurred at the end of my first full year visiting Clark. The principal ran into me in the hallway one morning and told me about a school board meeting which was to be held that evening. Clark had been invited to make a presentation about their parental outreach programs. It was an important event since they had never been invited to put their programs in the spotlight at a school board meeting in their ten-year history. It so happened (serendipity at work) that I was staying overnight, and was thus able to attend the meeting. There were several teachers in addition to administrators in attendance, most notably some of the older, more experienced teachers. During the meeting the topic of residential mobility came up when one of the board members asked a question, and the principal referred to me and how I was “helping them study mobility at Clark”. I got the feeling that due to my presence at the evening meeting, in conjunction with the principal mentioning how I was helping them, the mood shifted for a couple of teachers in particular. Whereas before they were noticeably “cool” toward me, they now greeted me and stopped to chat in the hallways after this event. It was like I had established that I was in “their camp”; I cared enough to come to this important evening meeting and

my research – my seemingly endless nosing around their school – perhaps would benefit them in some way.

It helped to know that the school was interested in knowing more about the mobility of its students. The data collected by the school district about student mobility was limited to the most recent move before the student entered Greene ISD. When a student enrolled in the district, information was collected about whether the students came from within the state, outside of the state, within the district, and if the most recent school was public or private. This information was not sufficient for assessing the total number and timing of moves over the course of a student's total time in school. In discussion with the principal, we agreed that the only way to gather this information was from each child's cumulative folder, which were kept by each teacher in their classrooms in a locked drawer. The principal told me that one of the teachers who was working on becoming an administrator needed a project and would help me. She and I went through her classes' cumulative folders, and she explained what the various forms contained, and the best way to find information about the number and timing of school moves. She also acted as a liaison with the other teachers, explaining that I would be coming to each classroom to collect the folders. This was important in smoothing the process, since some teachers were hesitant about releasing the folders to me (this only happened a couple of times, and with teachers who I did not know very well.)

Another turning point occurred at the beginning of my final year at Clark. By this time, I already knew most of the teachers and staff, to varying degrees, of course.

I had requested permission to attend the beginning of the year staff development program which was held at a nearby hotel. The principal agreed and told me that two other consultants who helped Clark with a reform project would also be there. In the beginning of the activities, the principal opened with a short speech to set the tone for the school year. This was followed by introductions of each team at the school including grade level teams, social service staff, fine arts teachers, paraprofessionals, etc. At the end, she invited me and the other two consultants to introduce ourselves. I was able to say thank you to the entire staff for making me feel welcome over the past year and a half, and gained some visibility – important for the new teachers who were present who had not seen me around the school. More important, the day allowed me to interact with small groups of teachers in staff as we participated in various get-to-know-you exercises. It was good to see friends I had made the previous year, and reconnect and hear about news from the summer such as who had a new grandchild, who had purchased a house, etc.

Acceptance by some key individuals were also important in building rapport. The principal was supportive of my frequent presence which allowed the space to build rapport with teachers and staff. Had she not been so willing to allow me at the school so often, this would have been a much harder task. There were also several individual staff members who were particularly instrumental in me learning about the school, and also in introducing me to other staff, and communicating that I was “okay”. One staff member took a liking to me and would always give me a big hug when she saw me. She also invited me to come to lunch with her and some of her

other friends at Clark. Her sponsorship allowed me entrée to an environment to which I would otherwise not have known about, or been able to gain access.

Initially, it was very uncomfortable and at times exhausting being at Clark Elementary. It was a brand new context coupled with a long drive (or flight) to get to the site, in addition to a primarily African American setting. As a white person, I was not used to being one of only a few other white people. Feeling like an outsider was very strong, especially at the beginning. While that feeling never completely disappeared, as I remained aware of my researcher status, it did lessen over time in general, although every so often something would remind me of my outsider status in a new way.

This is important because to me rapport is not a static concept. I do not conceive of rapport as something that once gained, is always possessed. Rapport is not a coin that one earns, always to have ready to redeem for a juicy insight from a respondent at the time of one's choosing. Rather, I experienced the waxing and waning of rapport. At times I felt very accepted at Clark; at others very uncomfortable and like a nosy outsider. On one day a teacher may be very friendly and welcoming, on another day, that same teacher seemed to be giving "go away" signals. One teacher comes to mind who was very talkative and quite revealing in our informal conversations in her classroom, but when we did an official interview, became much more guarded and close-lipped in her replies. There was not a linear progression from discomfort in the beginning to a sense of ease and welcome at the end; however, it was true that in general, I felt much more comfortable and

knowledgeable about the school by the end. I had learned more of how “the system” worked and I had developed some amount of trust with many of the teachers and school staff.

Whites studying African-Americans

In addition to my status of “evaluator”, I am also a white woman. Much has been written about white researchers studying African Americans. This is an important consideration and one that cannot be dismissed lightly, especially given the racial history and continuing racial tension within the United States. There are several concerns about whites studying African-Americans. Will my respondents censor certain information because I am white? Will I misunderstand and misinterpret what I hear and see? Will I be another example of a white researcher reaping the benefits of studying an African American population?

To the first question, did the teachers I interviewed censor themselves in some way because I am white? Probably, yes. In her book about West Indian immigrants, Mary Waters (1999) (a white academic) recounts her experiences interviewing West Indians, African Americans and whites. In comparing notes with the African American man who was her research assistant, she noticed that certain themes were markedly different in that African Americans expressed more negative thoughts about whites when talking to the African American researcher than when talking to the white researcher. I suspect this was true in my case, although since I conducted all of

the interviews myself, I'll never know with certainty. There are hints, though, that this occurred.

For example, although the school was primarily African American and in many ways incorporated African American culture, teachers did not often emphasize this when describing the school to me. Only one staff member told me in fairly strong language that she was glad Clark was “Afro-centric” so that they could give the students the hope of a good start – to build them up before they were sent into the white world. She also expressed her opinion that the best teacher for a Black child was a Black teacher, especially at the younger ages. It is probably not a coincidence that this staff member and I had what I considered to be a high level of trust at the time of that interview. She welcomed me early on in the study to observe her program at the school, and as time went on, introduced me to other staff at the school. She did not share the comments above until late in the study.

Some of the other teachers also expressed a similar view that children benefit from someone who is like them and can understand their experiences, but the difference was the absence of “white” and “Black” in their discussion. Sometimes it seemed like the elephant in the middle of the room that everyone politely ignores. Depending on the interview, I at times asked about race in explicit terms. More often than not, using the terms “Black” or “African American” and “white” helped diffuse (what I perceived to be) a reticence to talk about race.

In my discussions with the relatively few white teachers and staff, race was a more comfortable topic, and often brought up by the respondents. Possibly because I

am white, these teachers and staff felt comfortable bringing up some of their concerns about aspects of Clark, most notably the use of Black English Vernacular by some of the teachers. In addition, not being members of the racial majority at the school, they had an “outsider” perspective. They expressed concern about the Latino/a students, and wondered if the school was as good for the Latinos as it was for the African American students. In contrast, the most common response when I asked African American teachers about the Latino/a students was that they were doing “fine” – no specific problems that they could think of.

There is no escaping our bodily containers; I am a white woman and this no doubt influenced not only my perceptions, but also the perceptions those at Clark had of me. Two ways this shaped the research come to mind. The first is that because I was very sensitive to the matter of whites studying African American, I noticed in myself a hesitance to be critical. Part of this stemmed from the possibility that I may be misinterpreting and therefore the criticism would be incorrect in some way; another part related to not wanting to be yet another white academic who criticizes and puts down aspects of African American experience. I did my best to acknowledge this tension and still put forth a critical analysis.

The second issue is that beyond being a white person studying African Americans, I am a white woman who interviewed African American men. I have no doubts that a white man or an African American man may have gleaned other information from the African American men teachers I interviewed. (For that matter, it is also likely that another white woman would have gleaned different information

from me.) Some areas which may have been shaped by this difference may have been topics such as their perceptions of elementary school as being “female-dominated”. Perhaps they would have divulged more negative assessments about this to another man. Or maybe they held back in their negative assessments of the community in order not to air dirty laundry in front of a white person.

I cannot know for sure how these differences shaped my interactions with teachers and administrators at Clark Elementary. I can, however, make every effort to be aware of my own perceptions as I make sense of my observations, experiences and interviews. Ultimately, I hold to the idea that intersubjectivity is possible. Race and gender, while very important, are not the only defining factors that shape interactions. Even within interviews with someone sharing the same race and gender, there are points of connection and understanding as well as points of tension and misunderstanding (Johnson-Bailey, 1999). What seems important to me is acknowledging our lenses and perspectives as a way to make them explicit, rather than allowing them to remain as invisible rudders.

This does not wholly prevent misunderstanding and misinterpretation, but it is a start in the right direction. When I encountered things that puzzled me, I would usually ask one of my trusted sources at the school who I thought would be familiar with the topic or situation in question. This does not mean that this challenge goes away – those who I asked had their own perception of the particular situation, which does not represent the “truth” of the matter. The point, however, is that I sought more information about interpretation in an attempt for greater understanding. School staff

read large portions of the evaluation reports and were invited to make comments. Relatively few were made, and these were minor corrections of fact or chronology. It is true that this current research relies more heavily on interpretation; I have done my best to clarify questions along the way. It is also the case that the analysis by the researcher does not always match completely with a participants' view.

I did my best to understand the school context as completely as I was able; field work over the course of two and a half years allowed me to see the school in a multitude of situations. I was also able to see teachers over a long period of time, rather than relying solely on interviews which provide a good snapshot of a respondent's thoughts at a particular time on a particular day.

The final question about who reaps the benefit of research was made real to me early on. After the first few months at Clark Ms. Owens, the woman who ran a nearby community drop-in homework program, invited me to come to a meeting of community leaders. What a perfect opportunity! Right before we entered the meeting she handed me a book to look at – a controversial book written by a white woman who talks about educating children who grow up in poverty.⁹ One of the African American men at this meeting saw me with the book and rolled his eyes and immediately turned to whisper something the person sitting next to him. I thought it was imperative that they did not think I was giving the book to Ms. Owens as if I thought it was a good book for her to read, and that by implication I supported the views of the book. I had to say something. In a move of desperation, I made some

⁹ The book is by Ruby Payne (1998), which is discussed in Chapter 5.

comment about how Ms. Owens had just shown me the book. She proceeded to his end of the table to tell him it was a good book, if he could be open to taking the good parts and leaving the bad. He said something about how the author as an Anglo had no right to talk about the Black community. Ms. Owens answered him by explaining that the book was not just about Black families, but was based on 25 years of research with poor children and families. He said, “Well, why couldn’t we have written this and had the profits from the publication instead of her?” Ms. Owens replied, “Why don’t we do a lot of things?” [Field Notes 7/11/2000]. Needless to say, it was an uncomfortable start to the meeting for me, the only white person around the table that afternoon.

As I spent time at Clark, my original research interests changed as I heard more of what administrators and teachers told me was most important and of concern to them. My focus shifted to include not only the approaches that Clark employed to respond to its community, but also the importance of residential mobility as well as the emphasis on care that permeated my discussions with administrators and teachers. I took some small comfort that the research about residential mobility resonated with many of the administrators and teachers who expressed interest in hearing about my results. (Were they just being polite?) I was able to provide data that the principal would otherwise not have had, through my hand-collected mobility information. As a case study school for the evaluation project, Clark also gained a certain measure of status, since the case study schools were selected as examples of effective schools. Yet, the fact remains that it is I who stands to gain from the end analysis as it stands

in this form. I tried, however, throughout the process to “give back” parts to Clark so we could share the benefits of research.

All research has strengths and weaknesses. In this chapter I have described my methods, and also considered several issues which shaped (in ways both known and unknown) my understanding of the social realities of Clark Elementary. Case studies are particularly helpful in providing an in-depth understanding of a complex context, and this is one of the strengths of this research – the opportunity for fine-grained analysis based on multiple years of observation within the school setting.

CHAPTER THREE

Carol Clark Elementary: Description of the Research Site

In this chapter I provide an overview of Carol Clark Elementary which lays the background for the analysis which follows. Clark Elementary is a large (875+) pre-Kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school. One of 22 elementary schools in the Greene Independent School District (ISD), it is located in a large metropolitan area in Texas. The majority of students and teachers are African American. I begin with a description of the neighborhood, school and student body, and the high-stakes testing environment. I then continue with several ways that the teachers and administrators understand themselves, with particular attention to what they consider unique about their school and community. These include 1) Clark as being on the “cutting edge” – a trailblazer, having achieved various “firsts” within the district; 2) the approach to teacher selection; 3) Clark’s incorporation of multiple intelligences; 4) the pervasive consequences of residential mobility; and 5) how the principal perceives Clark as reaching out to the community.

The neighborhood

Clark Elementary is not a neighborhood school that one imagines nestled in between well kept houses on tree-lined streets. Located near two major freeways on the eastern border of Greene Independent School District (ISD), Clark’s closest neighbors are several car dealerships. A few blocks away, a busy street mostly populated with strip malls contains a mix of established chain businesses and mom

and pop storefronts serving various ethnic groups. A recently defunct retail mall since converted to a sparsely leased technology center stands a few blocks from the school. Immediately adjacent to the school, a large health care company has also moved out of the area, taking a cadre of Clark elementary school volunteers with it.

A few blocks in the other direction, one finds the start of the 27 apartment and condominium complexes which make up Clark's attendance zone. Many of these apartment buildings are owned by absentee landlords and managed from off-site which contributes to poor repair. Teachers and administrators talk about the high crime rate in the neighborhood, and express concern about the lack of recreational space for the children. According to one of the teachers who has been at Clark since it opened, the neighborhood used to be a "hip area" where single adults lived who worked in the City. Because the housing was intended for single adults, there are few playgrounds or other child-friendly amenities. In addition, the units were not designed for families, and certainly not for the multiple-family situations that now occur frequently in this area. The mismatch of the housing with the current residents contributes to overcrowding and a less-than-ideal environment for the children.

The school

Despite the surroundings, Clark itself was a rather cheery place. Upon entering the front doors of the school, a large colorful sign proclaiming "Clark students are college-bound!" catches your attention. For students who may be the first in their families to attend college, this is an important message to begin

communicating early. Teachers can wear jeans one Friday each month – as long as their jeans are accompanied by a college tee-shirt or sweatshirt. Clark also has a “Hall of Fame” where photos of former students who have entered college are proudly displayed.

Built in the early 1990s, the building is in good condition. Like all schools in the district, Clark has an “open concept” layout. The library is a large open area, with no walls separating it from the hallways. Tables and bookshelves divide the space, and several small “caves” – rooms with no doors – line one side of the library which allows space for one-on-one work with children. I conducted many of my interviews in one of these “caves”. The classrooms also share this open plan. Four classrooms fill a large room, divided by cupboards for backpacks and bookshelves. Along the back of each classroom is a line of four or five computers, which creates a separation between classrooms. The principal, who describes herself as a “very visual person”, encourages the teachers to cover their walls with examples of student work, motivational posters, lists of words, math terms and the TAAS objectives. In some classrooms the amount of information overwhelms me, but no one can say the classroom walls are boring.

Teachers expressed both disadvantages as well as advantages about the open concept building plan. For many teachers who had taught in more traditional “egg carton” schools with enclosed classrooms, moving to an environment with no doors or walls required an adjustment. Often, you can hear what is happening in other classrooms, which can be distracting. Sometimes it can be hard to hear simply with

the ambient noise from four classrooms, even if no one is being particularly loud. If one teacher likes to play music when her class is writing in their journals, other classes are affected. Some teachers think the children would be better able to concentrate with fewer opportunities for distraction. Special education, pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade classrooms were more enclosed than the older classrooms.

There are advantages to the building plan (besides contributing to less expensive construction costs for the school district). Some less experienced teachers liked that they had easier access to other teachers throughout the day. They could ask another teacher a quick question, and sometimes got ideas from seeing (or hearing) how other teachers were conveying a particular lesson. For some, the open concept contributed toward a collegial environment, facilitating an interchange of contact and ideas.

All but one or two teachers used clusters of desks (which they called pods) in their classrooms; it was rare to see the “traditional” arrangement of individual desks placed in rows and columns each facing toward the front. The cluster approach provided students ease for group work, and paralleled a focus on cooperation and being part of a group, rather than a mere conglomeration of individual students. Often teachers would call their students to gather on the floor in the front of the classroom – for teaching a new concept, or reading a story. This helped with the noise level – when teachers used this approach they did not have to speak as loudly as when students were at their desks.

Clark's student body

Flags representing the nationalities of all the students who attended during Clark's inaugural year hung in the breezeway near the school entrance. Thirteen flags celebrated the diversity in the student body at that time. By all accounts, Clark had always had a majority of African American students, however the percentage has increased over the last decade. This is important because it reflects the increase of African American and Latinos to this area which occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Before then, whites were the main residents of the Greene ISD area. In the early 1990s, Clark's student body was 74% African American, 16% Latino/a and 10% other (white, Asian and native American). By the period of the study, the student body had changed, in part reflecting the broader trends within the district. During 1990-2000, the white population decreased by nearly a third, while the Latino/a population almost doubled and the African American population grew by 10 percent. "White flight" began in the eastern part of Greene ISD, where Clark operates, and moved west throughout the district.¹⁰ Clark's student body during the 2001/2002 school year included 82% African Americans, 15% Latino/a, and 3% other¹¹. Clark serves the highest concentration of African American students in the district; the next highest concentration of African American students was 56% in another school on the same side of Greene ISD. During the three years of the study,

¹⁰ These figures were compiled from various City Newspaper articles which have not been listed individually in order to protect the confidentiality of the schools and the district.

¹¹ Student body compositions come from the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System of campus performance.

the percentage of African American students has increased at Clark, while decreasing in other Greene ISD schools.

The area has also changed socioeconomically. Concurrent with the racial changes within Greene ISD, the number of poor students in area schools increased 98 percent. According to the description of the Clark attendance zone as described in grant applications, “our once vibrant, middle class neighborhood has become an area of concentrated poverty, unemployment, lower education levels, poor housing, substance abuse, and crime.” About three-quarters of Clark students qualified for free or reduced price lunch. While this is among the highest in the district, there are several other elementary schools which surpass this level of economic disadvantage. At the time the research began, Greene ISD was nearing the end of a decade long increase in students. The current leveling off is attributed to a drop in new house construction and no new apartments being built. Across the district, 2001 figures show 44% of students living in apartments, and 56% in single-family homes.¹² The situation for Clark, however, is striking in that due to the most recent school zoning, 100% of Clark families live in apartments or rent nearby condominiums. There are no single-family houses in the school attendance zone.

¹² Various City Newspaper articles.

Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the state-wide assessment test during the study period, loomed large at Clark Elementary.¹³ Third grade students experience the TAAS test for the first time, taking math and reading tests. A writing test is added to the fourth grade slate of tests. These results are tallied and publicly posted (in aggregate) on the Texas Education Association's website. Schools receive rankings of "exemplary", "recognized", "acceptable", or "not acceptable" depending on the percentage of students who pass the tests. An entire industry revolves around the test administration; teachers and parents can purchase workbooks, game books and software tailored to the test. At Clark, the software in the computer labs (which the students visited daily) contained individualized TAAS-related questions.

It is hard to communicate the intensity and anxiety which accompanied teachers' and administrators' efforts to help students pass the TAAS. As early as the first week of school, the teacher otherwise known as "the test specialist" spoke to the after-school program students about how they would need to work hard and do their best so they could do well on the test (which they would not take until the following spring). This teacher did not have a classroom of students, but rather oversaw the

¹³ This emphasis on TAAS scores happens at many schools; Clark is not unique in this respect. A large body of research documents how the TAAS test shapes school practices. Much of this literature takes a critical perspective, arguing that an over-emphasis on testing decreases teacher autonomy, and "dumbs down" the curriculum, as the test is a minimum-standards test. See McNeil (2000) for an example of how teachers resisted the pressures of the TAAS test in shaping their pedagogical approaches.

administration of the various pre-tests of the TAAS which occurred several times during the school year, and also strategized about how to raise test scores at the school. Clark had TAAS pep rallies, special evening programs to tell the parents about the tests, and geared their entire after school program solely around extra preparation and reinforcement for the TAAS test. While seemingly excessive, many schools undertake similar kinds of activities, since the pressure to have students pass the test is so extreme.

After the test administration, schools received individual scores and scores for various subgroups of students. The administrators at Clark also compiled the data by both race/ethnicity and sex so they could compare third grade African American boys' scores with third grade African American girls' scores, for example.

Administrators emphasized that African American boys consistently scored lower than African American girls and other groups, however, in 2002 Latinas scored the lowest on most of the TAAS tests. There were not enough white or Asian students for meaningful comparisons.

School staff perceptions of the uniqueness of Clark Elementary

Clark Elementary as trailblazer within Greene ISD

When Clark opened, student demographics throughout the school district had shifted, yet all the principals and a majority of teachers were white. Ms. Wilson was the first African-American principal in the district. In addition, she was recruited from outside the district, bringing a different perspective gained through her previous

successes with helping low-performing schools increase their achievement.

According to the principal and some other teachers who have been at Clark from the beginning, clashes were not infrequent as Ms. Wilson and Clark bumped up against “the Greene way.”

Coming from [a neighboring large district] to Greene, they did have different philosophies, how they did things, and I guess the only adjustment was we had to learn “the Greene way.”... The only thing that bothered me was that if it was not “the Greene way” it wasn’t valid. And I didn’t like that when we first came over – I really didn’t like that because although we came with a lot of experience it was like ‘well, this is not how we do it.’ But my philosophy is there’s more than one way to cook a chicken, so there’s more than one way to teach a child how to read. (Ms. Madison, former teacher and current content specialist)

Ms. Madison continued with an example as she explained the phonics/whole language debate in the district when Clark opened. Teaching phonics was considered a “no-no” when they first came to Greene.

That’s fine and dandy, depending on the population that you are working with. Some children – if you are working with a population of children that come to the school, have a rich background, that they already know the basics – no, you don’t need to teach those type of skills – you may need to strengthen those skills. But if you are working with a group of students that has never been read to, [whose] first time in school may be first grade because kindergarten is not mandatory – what do you do to build that foundation for them? You have to do what works. And what works may not be the popular way of doing things. But you have to do what’s going to make the child successful. (Ms. Madison)

This comment encapsulates three important themes that undergird the history of Clark. First, the students at Clark, especially when the school first opened, were different from the majority of Greene students in that Clark had the highest

percentage of African-American students in the district. Second, the principal and long-time staff subscribe to “doing what works” for the children in their charge. And third, that if doing what is best for the students butts up against “the Greene way”, so be it. This is not to say that Clark goes out of the way to take a particularly confrontational stance with the district. Clark does, however, persist in finding a way to provide what they see as important for the students, despite heat from the district.

Clark administrators and many teachers view the school as on “the cutting edge” and boast of many “firsts.” The school web page summarizes the array of programs and approaches implemented at Clark under Ms. Wilson’s leadership. For example, Clark was the first school to have Communities in Schools and apply for and receive Title I funds, both targeted toward serving the needs of “at-risk” students. Communities in Schools is a national dropout prevention program that works in partnerships with schools, families and community leaders to provide a wide array of programs and activities geared toward creating a supportive atmosphere for students. Children are identified for the CIS program by school staff, self-referrals, or parent requests. Reasons for referral include infractions of school rules, academic problems, need for counseling, mental or physical health problems, violent or delinquent behavior, employment needs or family financial problems. Services include tutoring, counseling, after-school and extended hours programs, various enrichment and community service activities and career awareness. It is a year round program which also addresses the needs of the families through social service information and referrals.

Title I is a federal fund allocated for “improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged”¹⁴. Clark Elementary began a school-wide Title I program, with an emphasis on educational technology. Networked computers and interactive video were incorporated into every classroom. In addition, a computer lab with 37 stations was added to build skills and provide individualized tracking for each child. Classes rotate through the labs each day, providing students time to work on improving math and reading skills.

Clark was the first to have a pilot program of a Parent Center, which are now implemented throughout the district, and also the first to offer GED (General Equivalency Degrees) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on the campus for parents as well as other community members. In addition, the school website notes that Clark was the first to promote a strong Afro-centric focus and curriculum as well as a staff in Greene ISD that was “culturally representative of the student population”¹⁵. One of the staff became the first African American Greene ISD Teacher of the Year. They also envision part of their uniqueness according to their emphasis on technology, including two computer labs with individualized learning software (geared toward mastering the state test) and a distance satellite partnership with a school in the Rio Grande Valley to promote cross-cultural learning. They also offered sex-segregated classes for selected third and fourth grade students.

¹⁴ United States Department of Education.

¹⁵ This is an interesting assertion in that there have been few or no Latino/a teachers despite a student population of approximately 15% Latino/a students. Clearly, the focus is on the African American students in this statement.

Ms. Wilson does not shy away from trying new things – she embraces change if she thinks it will benefit the children. One of the original staff members describes it this way:

Our biggest strength is that Ms. Wilson is a visionary. And she has also said that you are not going to have success without some failures. If you fail at what you are doing, well, let's try something else – she's open to change.

In the mid-1990s, Clark was considered a poor-performing school, which meant that students could transfer to another school. The only other Greene ISD schools to be on the poor-performing list that year were two nearby elementary schools and the Greene learning center, an alternative school. At the same time, however, Clark was receiving recognition as a school that had made strides in education. The Mayor at the time recognized 20 Big City schools for academic achievement, and some for consistent academic excellence.¹⁶ Clark received the award for the largest improvement in TAAS scores. Despite the disappointing scores on the TAAS which led to the “poor-performing” label, the teachers at Clark Elementary, and particularly the administration, were actively engaged in changing that designation.

The principal and administrative staff embraced various school reform efforts and partnerships. One important partnership was in conjunction with President Clinton's 21st Century funding, which provided after school programs for students aged 9 to 18 and adults. In October of 1998, the 21st Century Community Learning

¹⁶ As cited in a 1997 City Newspaper article.

Center began providing extra academic tutorials, sports and other enrichment activities to the third and fourth grade students. This was the first after school program in the Greene school district.

The principal also signed on with three other school reform movements. While her intent was to bring a wealth of new ideas and different approaches to the school with the ultimate goal of helping more children excel in school, the results were mixed. Many teachers agreed that often there was “too much going on” at the school – too many different programs to implement, and not enough time to spend in the classroom actually teaching the students. This was a tension throughout the three school years during which I observed at Clark Elementary.

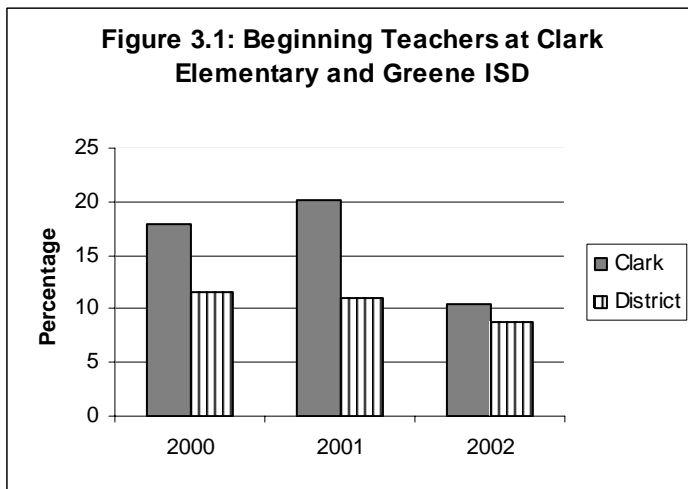
Selection of teachers

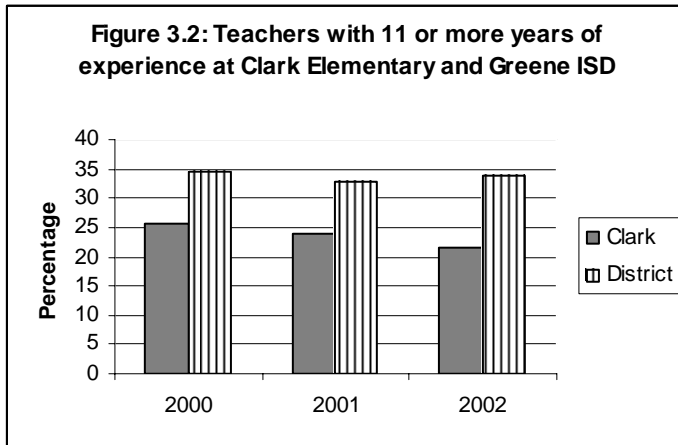
The majority of teachers at Clark Elementary during the study period were African American.¹⁷ With the exception of Kindergarten, which was staffed by mostly non-African American teachers, grades one through four were comprised almost entirely of African American teachers. During the 2000 through 2002 school years, the few white teachers who did leave Clark were replaced with African

¹⁷ Faculty were not hired to match the 14% Latino student body – for various reasons. In part, they may have been difficult to find, but also other schools in the district had far higher concentrations of Latino students. In addition, some Latino/a teachers are eligible to teach bilingual classes, which pays more. Clark Elementary during the time of the study was not a bilingual campus. This meant that all students who required bilingual programs were sent to another school. It is also reasonable to conclude that the principal (as well as other teachers) thought that the Latino/a students were “doing fine” and not in any special need of Latino/a teachers. Instead, the focus at Clark was on the many “firsts” which related to the African American population, such as the first African American principal, the first staff which was primarily African American, etc.

American teachers. There were no Latino/a teachers, although there were two Latina aides who worked with the Limited English Proficient (LEP) program. By the final year of the study, there was only one white classroom teacher in the first through fourth grades. The predominately African American staff contrasts sharply with the rest of the district that has an average of 19% African American teachers.

In terms of tenure, Clark had more beginning teachers when compared with other schools within Greene ISD, and fewer teachers with more than 11 years of experience. See Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below for 2000 through 2002 data on teacher experience.





In addition, many teachers were promoted to positions such as Assistant Principal, so Clark also suffered a “brain drain” of sorts, as its more experienced teachers left for opportunities in other schools. The principal had a reputation of being a mentor to young African American teachers who wished to move up the administrative ladder; several teachers left each year for these kinds of positions. By the end of the study period, both Assistant Principals had been groomed by the principal and had previously taught at Clark Elementary. One came directly from his position as teacher at Clark to his position as Assistant Principal, and the other woman had been an Assistant Principal at another school within the district before returning to serve at Clark.

Ms. Wilson and the other administrators were clear about how they selected teachers; they stressed repeatedly the importance of hiring “teachers who care”. Mrs. Raymond, one of the assistant principals, explained that many teachers initially have a middle class perspective on education. Her example was that that not all children will be excited by the prospect of a school holiday or summer vacation. This is

because school represents safety, routine, at least two meals, and a warm environment. Because of the type of children that comprise the majority of the Clark student body, she explained they look for teachers who have compassion, because “you can be taught how to teach, but not how to love kids” (FN 1/13/2000 p.3 Assistant Principal).

The principal is not afraid to take an inexperienced teacher, but one with the right motivation and care for the students, and help train, nurture, and develop them as teachers. She acknowledged that this can be a risky approach. During the 2001/2002 year, for example, three inexperienced teachers quit before the third month of school because, in part, they were overwhelmed with the rigors of teaching and did not have any formal teaching preparation; they had been hired with “emergency certifications”. The principal is willing to take risks such as this, however, because she believes so strongly that teachers must care for the students and so therefore she sometimes chooses teachers who seem to be a “gamble” due to their lack of teaching experience or even formal training in education. The theme of caring was pervasive, and I will explore this topic more fully in Chapter 5.

Ms. Wilson also specifically recruited African American men to serve as teachers. During the 2001/2002 school year, the number of African American men teachers was at a high: seven classroom teachers and two fine arts teachers. In addition, there was one assistant principal and two special education aides who were African American men. These teachers comprised 26% of the first through fourth grade and fine arts classroom teachers. Two main factors contributed to the

principal's aggressive recruitment of African American men to be involved at Clark: the lower scores of African American boys on the TAAS test, and the high number of single-headed families (the majority headed by mothers and grandmothers).

Some of this recruitment occurred through normal school district channels. When an African American man applied to work as an elementary school teacher at the district, the principal made a point to interview these candidates. There were also more informal modes of recruitment which she used. For example, several male teachers described how they had some form of contact with Clark, such as through having a child at the school, or knowing someone who worked there. At some point, the principal suggested they become teachers at Clark – and several did! Some had teaching experience; other she convinced to try teaching and pursue alternative certification. It is important to note, however, that most did not have their teaching certificate – even those with prior teaching experience.

Multiple intelligences

Developing multiple intelligences and respecting various learning styles is another theme. The idea behind such an approach “is not *if* the children are smart, but *how* are they smart?” (FN 1/20/2000 Principal). Multiple intelligences comes from the work of Gardner (1985) who observed that, in contrast to Binet's understanding of intelligence as logic and analysis of problems, children also have other kinds of intelligence. He includes linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and visual-spatial in his list of other ways

of apprehending information. Gardner observed that these other kinds of skills often went unrewarded in the school setting. The idea is that everyone uses these skills in varying combinations, and that by acknowledging and encouraging a broader view of intelligence, children can increase their understanding and achievement.

The principal's vision is for each child to have a sense of what they are good at by the time they leave Clark. Even in cases where children attend Clark from K-4, the children then have multiple transitions to make – to the intermediate school for two years, then to middle school for two years, to the ninth grade center for one year, and finally to high school for the remaining three years. In the best possible scenario, assuming no residential mobility, the children will spend the longest amount of time at Clark. In light of this, the principal thinks it is very important that the children are able to leave the elementary school with some notions of their strengths. To facilitate this, the school provides an array of fine arts classes referred to as “specials.” First through fourth grade students rotate through each of the five offerings: art, dance, instrumental music, vocal music, and physical education. Some students also have the opportunity to explore technology, either through classes with the technology specialist, or through the morning broadcast program, in which the third and fourth grade students learn how to use the video equipment to provide a live broadcast of announcements, student birthdays and the school motto, which occurs each morning. These electives are often the favorites of the students, and represent a break from the academic subjects. Here, a fourth grade student writes about her dance class:

My favorite memory of dance is when we were practicing for the Black History program. I was radiant. The reason why I like dance is because I am very talented in it. Another thing is the steps are pretty easy – well, sometimes. When it came time for us to get on stage and start dancing we were dazzling. That is why in dance we have lots of memories.

The principal is adamant that “real learning will not be sacrificed to TAAS”, yet within the high-stakes testing context, even these “arts” teachers are required to show how the skills students are learning can be linked expressly to the mandated knowledge and skills students are supposed to be learning. For example, in an art class, one description on the wall said “TLW (the learner will): demonstrate an understanding of different containers of volume, including cubes, cones and spheres”.

The principal explicitly connects her emphasis on “specials” to her belief that many African-American children are kinesthetic learners, and thus benefit from a hands-on approach which can be experienced in classes such as music, art and physical education. Her belief is reminiscent of other research which also connects kinesthetic learning with African American children, or what Hale (2001) refers to as “verve”. Along with offering these choices, she also recruited special speakers to make presentations to the students. I observed two of these presentations, one about math and one about writing. Both presenters were African American, and both incorporated a lot of hand motions, body movements, and music to help students remember key points. Ms. Wilson noted that this was especially important for the students at Clark. I had a hard time accepting that “most” African American students learn kinesthetically. It would seem to me that learning styles would be distributed

more equally among the students; however, it did seem that the approach of using music popular with the students made the learning more fun and exciting for the students. In both presentations, the speakers had the rapt attention of nearly all students in the gym – something not the case with other presentations I observed, such as the anti-smoking rally and the re-telling of an African folk tale.

Student Mobility

Administrators and teachers alike expressed the difficulties related to the frequent residential movement of the families in the school community. Clark had some of the highest mobility rates in the district during 1993 – 2002. With the exception of two blips, Clark had the highest mobility rates in the district. At the inception of this study, Clark had recently experienced its highest rates of mobility ever – more than 40%. Clark’s mobility has declined in recent years, to 33% in 2000 and 35.1% for the 2001/2002 school year – the final year of data collection. This reflects a district-wide decline in mobility; however the gap between Clark’s mobility rate and the district has actually increased in the past year.¹⁸

Twenty-seven apartment and condominium complexes within a two-square mile area comprise the Clark Elementary school attendance zone. Several factors contribute to the residential and school mobility of the student population. Many of the apartment complexes offer free or reduced rent for the first month or two as an

¹⁸ Please see Figure 4.1 for a visual representation of selected Greene Independent School District Elementary schools. Trends for the five schools with the lowest mobility rates and five schools with the highest mobility rates in the district are also depicted.

incentive to move in, and some families routinely take advantage of these offers and leave after the incentive period. Because the housing is typically low cost and of low quality, if families become more financially stable or able to afford better housing, they sometimes move outside of Clark's school attendance boundaries.

There was also a sense, especially from the administrators that the current situation of high student mobility was not purely an accident of individual circumstances. For the first eight years of operation, the school district changed Clark's attendance zones four times. A significant and detrimental change occurred before the 1998/1999 school year, when a small but stable home-owning neighborhood was rezoned to another nearby elementary school. The most residentially stable families and students no longer attended Clark, thus leaving a school population comprised completely of apartment dwellers. School personnel felt that this made a significant difference in their ability to organize students and parents because they no longer had a stable core group.

Responding to the needs of the community

The principal sees herself as actively helping the community in various tangible ways. One example was her pursuit of grant money to create a playground which doubled as a park for the community after school hours. On my first visit to the school, before I had a chance to go inside, I noticed the playground which (surprising to me) was not behind any sort of fence. The school had worked with a community agency to transform the school play yard into a park which could be (and was) used

by community members when school was not in session. The park includes school and community playground equipment, landscaping, picnic tables, park benches, volleyball court, a jogging trail and gazebo. A local artist was commissioned to paint a bright, colorful mural which included a group of children with various skin tones at play. At times, the wall near the mural or the school sign was “tagged” with graffiti, but this was a relatively infrequent occurrence, and was promptly removed. This park was the only one available in the immediate area, and the principal saw this as a way to reach out not only to school families, but to all who lived in the neighborhood nearby. This invitation was accepted by many in the neighborhood who took advantage of a recreation spot within walking distance of their homes.

Another example is her willingness to open the school for various community-based, non-school events. For example, a pastor of a local church wanted to hold a Christmas pageant and food give-away in the school multi-purpose room. Even though there was no official link between the school and this church, she agreed as a way to help the community. She also opens the adult education classes (GED, ESL, and job training) to any adults in the community – they did not have to be a parent or relative of a current student at Clark Elementary.

In addition, she provided support for a neighborhood after-school drop-in center. A woman who had been a former VISTA volunteer ran a program in the clubhouse of one of the nearby condominium complexes. There were computers, a place to get help with homework, and various clubs for the children – such as a dance team. They also brought in speakers for various topics such as abstinence and sex

education, anti-smoking messages, as well as the police officer who specialized in community liaison, to try to build trust with the community. While it is true that the woman running the after-school program would have liked even more financial support from the school, it is notable that the principal directed the resources she did toward a non-school district program.

A striking example of the principal's willingness to go beyond the school walls to address what she saw as a root problem of the community related to the poor housing in the school attendance zone. Many of the apartments and condominiums are managed from off-site, and disrepair is common. In one case, the principal organized a group of parents and hired a bus to take them to the office of the landlord. They went to speak to him and protest the condition of their living areas. He not only arranged to have the repairs made in a timely manner, but he was so impressed by her advocacy that he soon after presented the school with a check for \$1,000.

She often talked about the need to empower and educate the parents and families so that they could be effective partners with the school. This was her reason for offering adult education opportunities, and trying to reach out to the parents, rather than requiring the parents to reach out to the school. The results, however, were mixed; many parents did not take advantage of these programs, and many remained hostile toward the school and the teachers. What seems important, however, is her effort and intention to reach out. Of course, there were examples that the school perhaps did not do this in the best possible way. But the principal's motto seemed to be explained in part by "instead of asking what the parents can do for us,

we need to ask what we can do for the parents”. One problem with this approach, however, is the implication that parents may not be very good educational partners as they are, but require some type of remediation.

Clark lacked parents participating in advocacy roles. For example, for several years there had been no Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) at Clark. While many have criticized PTOs for merely being vehicles for fundraising, others note both their symbolic importance as well as the opportunity for informal teacher-parent interaction (see for example, Morris and Morris, 2000). The final year of the study, a husband-wife team worked to revive the PTO. They kept the dues very low (\$3) so as not to prevent people who had little money from joining, and their main objectives were to get more parents involved at the school, as well as providing a forum for parents to meet each other. One of the ideas was to create a “talent bank” in which parents could list their strengths and then call upon each other for help. For example, if one parent was good with math homework, they may be able to offer assistance to another parent who maybe never finished school and was thus unable to help their child with homework.

Another lack of parent involvement was on the district-mandated “school decision” committee which was supposed to be comprised on an administrator, a teacher from each grade level, a school staff representative, a parent representative (or more than one) and a community representative. Occasionally a parent would come to a meeting, but the parent rarely returned. In part this may have been due to the poor facilitation of these meetings, and that little of importance was discussed. It was

hard for me to believe that at a large school of 875 students, there were not two parents who would have been interested in serving on such a committee.

Clark is not exemplary in its record of parent involvement; but it is a school that was trying to reach parents and the community and was negotiating the pressures that face schools today. In the next chapter I explore the thoughts and responses of the teachers and administrators to the residential mobility facing its students, and how the pressure of the TAAS test shapes their beliefs and actions related to this community challenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Framing a problem: Mobility and high-stakes testing

In this chapter, I explore how teachers and administrators at Clark responded to the school mobility of its students. After a description of the contours of residential mobility at Clark Elementary, I examine how teachers and other school staff perceive the academic and social ramifications of mobility. I then consider how teachers help integrate students into their classrooms and at times attempt to prevent school moves of individual students. The pressure of TAAS shapes teachers' concerns about residential mobility. Most locate their concerns in the academic realm; social consequences are not given as much weight. Part of the explanation also lies in how teachers frame the student body as containing children with multiple needs. In this context students who move are merely experiencing one kind of instability and thus do not stand out as having special social needs.

Beliefs about mobility

During my first visits to Clark Elementary, the principal and vice-principal talked about the high student mobility rate and the challenges it created for the school. The administrators talked about the difference in Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) scores between children who have had some measure of stability at the school, and those who have had more disrupted school histories. On

the classroom level, the addition of new students throughout the year makes disruptions of the classroom environment frequent. When I first started spending time at Clark, mobility was one of the biggest buzz words, used by administrators, teachers and school staff alike. In an open-ended written survey of teachers conducted early in the study period, 22 of 42 teachers said that student mobility was Clark's biggest challenge.¹⁹ It was striking that all but a few used the word "mobility." Clearly, it was a topic of broad concern and they shared a common vocabulary. It was this emphasis that made me curious about how teachers perceived the consequences of residential mobility for the students, themselves and the overall school context, as well as their responses to this challenge.

The principal and other senior teachers painted an extreme picture of the mobility problem: "Our population – which is very hard – we're all apartment, our mobility rate up until last year was what? 63%, 69%." (Mr. Stewart) This mobility rate, according to this teacher, was three times as high as the mobility rate among the other elementary schools that were in the same comparison group with Clark. The state of Texas, in comparing school results on the TAAS test, creates groups of schools from within the state that have similar demographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity of students, percent economically disadvantaged, and percent mobile.

¹⁹ For comparison, the next largest shared response came from seven teachers who listed "the needs of the community and the students" (or some variant on this theme) as the biggest challenge facing Clark Elementary.

Another experienced teacher, who had been at Clark since the school opened described a different dimension of mobility – that students moved many times during one year.

When you talk about mobility, you need something you can compare. Like you can compare Clark to maybe Patterson or Holtz (other elementary schools within Greene ISD). Because maybe the children, they really move around. But the children at Patterson – they move, but not as much as the children at Clark – like they move six times in one school year. You need those types of statistics to make a valid point about mobility because mobility affects test scores, and promotion and retention. (Mrs. Madison)

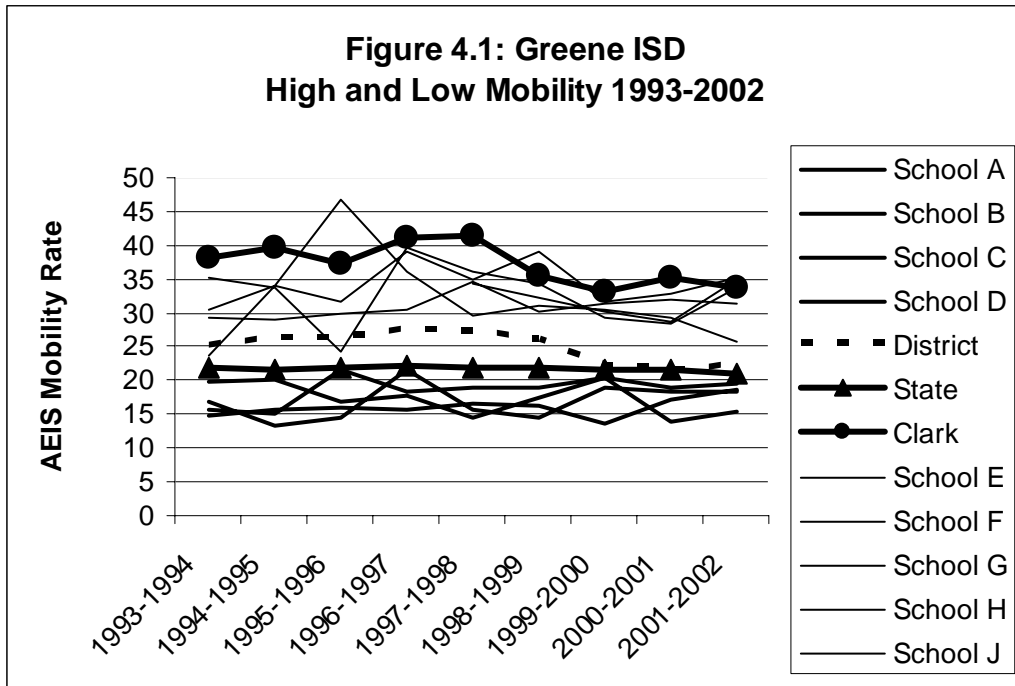
They expressed frustration about the perception that the school district ignored their situation of a student population with such high incidences of moving. Underlying this concern was the belief that mobility “affects test scores, promotion and retention” as we see in Mrs. Madison’ comments.

These descriptions of immense student moving were coupled with confusion about the definition of mobility. Repeatedly, the principal and other experienced teachers told me they did not know how the Texas Education Agency (TEA) calculated student mobility. One thing they wanted me to do was find out what the definition of mobility was “because they have never told us.” Each year TEA compiles a descriptive report for each school, noting test results and demographic information about students and teachers.

Mobility is calculated for the AEIS report for each campus. In contrast with the TEA definition, a student is considered to be mobile if he or she has missed more than 17% of the school year. This equates to missing six weeks or more at a

particular school. The AEIS definition of mobility was particularly important because it tied directly to which students the school was held responsible for in terms of TAAS testing. For example, if a student came to Clark Elementary after the first six weeks of school, that student's TAAS scores would not be counted with the non-mobile students. The students still take the TAAS, but they are considered separately as a "mobile subset". That is, if the mobile subset performs poorly, this is not counted against the receiving school when determining the ranking of that school.

The descriptions of such high mobility piqued my interest, especially because the school was not failing miserably, but was a showcase of various school reform efforts. I wanted to find out exactly where Clark stood compared to other schools within the district and state. The ideas about the magnitude of mobility expressed by the administration and senior teachers did not match the AEIS definition. Mr. Stewart estimated the mobility at over 60%, and also claimed that this rate was more than three times the other schools in the comparison group (which are included in the AEIS reports). According to the AEIS method of calculating mobility as students missing more than six weeks of school, his estimation and beliefs about Clark's mobility are not accurate. Figure 4.1 depicts the mobility rate for Clark Elementary from 1993 – 2002 in comparison with rates for other schools within Greene ISD.



We see that Clark’s mobility rate peaked in the period from 1996 – 1998, when slightly over 40% of students were classified as mobile. Within Greene ISD, Clark Elementary does have the highest percentage of mobile students for most of the period, although other schools at times exceed Clark’s mobility rate. Although Clark often is at the top of the chart, they do not have vastly different mobility rates from several other Greene ISD schools. An examination of the AEIS reports reveal a similar overestimation of Clark’s mobility compared with other schools. The comparison group is comprised of approximately 40 other elementary schools who are matched on various characteristics such as percent economic disadvantage, racial/ethnic composition and percent mobile. While the mobility rate at Clark

Elementary is on the higher end of the continuum, there are several schools with higher rates.

The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report uses one definition for determining mobility, while other reports by TEA use a calculation of students who have enrolled or withdrawn divided by the total number of students ever enrolled during the school year. This definition does not rely on an arbitrary percentage of time not at a school, but instead captures (and acknowledges) the change that occurs when students move schools.

Table 4.1: Percent mobility using TEA calculation

	Adds + Withdrawals	Total Enrollment	Percent Mobility
2002	469	902	52%
2001	343	877	39%
2000	364	935	39%

Using this formula, the definition of mobility comes closer to Mr. Stewart’s higher estimates, but still falls far short of the extreme picture he presents. (Recall that he estimated Clark’s mobility to be in the 60% range.)

Similarly, I discovered an overestimation about the perception of mobility for individual children from Mrs. Madison. When I collected individual information about the school histories of each student, I found only one student who had attended six schools. Instead, I found that students had moved, but not as frequently as some teachers made it seem. Only one student had attended six schools, and thirteen third and fourth grade students had attended five schools. It seems that a few students

stood out in the minds of the teachers – making exceptional cases to buttress the presentation of Clark as a school with very high student mobility.

Consequences of mobility: perceptions of teachers and staff

As noted earlier, concern about mobility was widespread among Clark teachers. One of the first grade teachers explained why she thought mobility was the biggest challenge that Clark faced:

I think the biggest challenge is trying to uh – trying to teach here – there's so much mobility and I mean, the biggest challenge is trying to keep your class together for a year, and be able to teach them, from, you know, the beginning to end without a lot of interruption. There's a lot, a lot, a LOT of moving and you know, you may start out one year, and it's like if you take a class picture at the beginning of the year, and take another at the end of the year, you might have a totally different class [laughs]. There's just a lot of movement, and that's a big challenge, to try to address those children when they come in, that you start off with, you know, you have a goal, and you start off your program, and then you're losing children, there are new children coming in, and you have to kinda like train them to the ways, and it's like okay, let me start all over again – I have a new group coming in, you know. I think that's probably the biggest challenge I face at this sort of school as a whole. Just, you know, working with the kids because there's such a high mobility rate. (Mrs. Chapman)

We see in her description both academic and social consequences which stem from students moving in and out of school – making it difficult to meet goals, and also the time it takes to train new students in the ways of the classroom. I turn first to an exploration of the academic challenges teachers connected to student mobility.

Academic consequences of mobility

In concert with some previous research about mobility and lowered academic outcomes, every teacher commented about negative consequences for individual students as a result of moving to a new school. With few exceptions, teachers mentioned academic concerns first. These include problems of curricular gaps, having to adjust to different learning strategies and techniques, and the difficulty and time required for assessment when cumulative folders are slow to arrive from the most recent school.

You're moving at a hundred miles per hour, and everybody is actually understanding, they can move with the teacher, and obviously you have to break. Stop. Assess a child. The child may not be at that level. The child may have moved two or three times before getting to Clark. When a child comes in, it's like having to stop. Almost start from the beginning of the year...If the kids have taken one cluster [test], two clusters, you know exactly what their weaknesses and objectives are, ...[but] this child is an unknown. (Mr. Griffin)

Other teachers also talked about increased time spent on review, and a slower pace in the classrooms when they had several new students in their classrooms. Several teachers also noted that at times academic problems spur families to switch schools, such as when a student will be retained. The parent enrolls the students in a new school with hopes that the students will be placed in the next grade level instead of being held back. Sometimes this strategy works in the short term if the cumulative folder does not arrive in time from the other school. In the long term, however, the student often struggles academically because they are not performing at grade level.

Another concern relates to assessment for special services. It takes time to test each child who enters Clark, and then, if necessary, the process for special education or other services is initiated by the teacher. These processes, especially in the situation of enrollment in special education, can be quite lengthy. Sometimes, when a child has moved frequently, the process may never get initiated, or if it has started, does not reach completion. Not only does the student not receive the assistance for which he or she is eligible, but teachers also have to figure out how to best serve students who are not able to perform at the same level as the other students in the classroom.

Beliefs about mobility and the TAAS tests

Almost all teachers thought that student mobility shaped the TAAS test results for their classrooms. Several specific beliefs emerged about how this occurred. The first belief is that the high student mobility directly and negatively affects student performance as measured by the TAAS tests.

Children who have been here longer - and if you track someone who has been here since kindergarten - they will pass. You can bet they are going to pass TAAS - if that's your measurement - they have no problem. Uh...and if we could keep our children - I mean, there'd be no problem. But with the mobility rate - [he trails off]. (Mr. Stewart)

Another teacher explains that she thinks the perception of student mobility is shaped by the state assessment tests:

Residential mobility is harder for teachers of higher grades because of TAAS. When they get new students in the middle of the year, they

have to learn about them, test them, teach them the rules, help them mesh with other students. (Mrs. Franklin)

This second grade teacher did not think that student mobility was as big of an issue for her, because she does not teach a “TAAS grade”, which starts in third grade and continues throughout high school. The pressure of the TAAS tests helped focus attention on the purported link between keeping students at Clark and test scores.

The second belief is that it is the good students, or the “best” students who always leave. Many teachers told me that their best student was leaving, or had recently left the school. When we talked about student moves, this was a noticeable theme. As families became more stable and could move to a house, they were no longer in the Clark attendance zone. In this way, the mobility affected the school from the teachers’ perspectives as not only an influx of potentially under-prepared students, but also as a kind of “brain drain”. The intense pressures associated with students passing the statewide achievement test, upon which school ratings are based, gave power to this belief because the teachers were apt to remember that one of their “best” had left when it came time to assess the overall performance of their class.

The third belief is that many students leave and return to Clark during the same year. Here, one second grade teacher summarizes this pattern:

I think the biggest problem this school faces is the high mobility, because they [the students] go in and out of school, just like there are going to a restaurant or, you know, checking out books, or things like that. And last year, for instance, I had a student who left – he didn’t come in the beginning of the school year – he came in the middle of the year, he left, and went to another school, and came back to this

school, maybe like in March, so if you think about it, he had gone to four different schools last year – in one school year. (Mrs. Duke)

Curricular gaps are an underlying concern about these students who “cycle” back and forth between schools.

Beliefs about mobility and TAAS: examining student level data

To examine these beliefs about mobility I collected student-level mobility data during the 2001-2002 school year for all third and fourth grade students. Many of the teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs are not borne out by the data I collected. I begin with an overview of school attendance histories for Clark third and fourth grade students. I then present data about how various dimensions of student mobility intersects with TAAS results.

Table 4.2 below provides a description of how often Clark third and fourth grade students had moved schools. These figures start at first grade. (Kindergarten is excluded because it is not required in the state of Texas.) This table captures mobility over multiple years, rather than a more narrow focus on the current school year. It would be possible, for example, to have a student who started the year at Clark, but who had moved in previous grades. For TAAS purposes, such a student would not be considered mobile. Both research about the possible effects of prior moving in addition to school personnel concerns shaped my decision to examine students’ entire school histories.

Table 4. 2: Number of Schools Attended by third and fourth grade students

# schools attended	3 rd Grade Students				4 th Grade Students			
	Number	* ²⁰ (minimum estimate)	Total	%	Number	* (minimum estimate)	Total	%
1	56	--	56	26%	32	--	32	15%
2	76	40	116	53%	51	36	87	42%
3	20	14	34	16%	26	36	62	30%
4	2	5	7	3%	8	9	17	8%
5	2	1	3	1%	5	5	10	5%
6	1	--	1	>1%	--	--	--	--
Total	157	60	217		122	86	208	

One-quarter (26%) of third grade students had spent their entire school career at Clark, compared to only 15% of fourth grade students. Just under 21% of third grade students and 43% of fourth grade students had attended three or more schools. One third grade student had attended six schools in his short school career.

The timing of the move is another dimension of mobility. The idea is that moving to a new school in the beginning of the year is less disruptive than moving in the middle of the year. One way parents help manage the change brought on by a school move is to arrange moves in the summer to coincide with the start of school. This eases the transition as everyone is taught the rules of the school and together

²⁰ Complete information about past schools attended was not available for all students. Often, records do not get sent to the student's next school. If the student came from a school outside of Greene ISD, there was no way to access this information. Those students with incomplete information are listed in this column, which represents a known, but possibly minimum estimate of a child's mobility. For example, there may be a student for whom I know her second through fourth grade school history, but no information about first grade is in the cumulative folder. I know how many schools she attended during these grades, but have no way of knowing how many schools were attended during the first grade year.

learns the routines and style of the teacher in the beginning of the year. Table 4.3 shows mid-year moves for third and fourth grade students.

Table 4.3: Number of Mid-Year Moves – All third and fourth grade students

# mid-year moves	3 rd Grade Students				4 th Grade Students			
	Number	* (minimum estimate)	Total	%	Number	* (minimum estimate)	Total	%
0	99	12	111	51%	84	18	102	49%
1	49	33	82	38%	30	38	68	33%
2	8	9	17	8%	8	13	21	10%
3	1	4	5	2%	3	7	10	5%
4	1	--	1	>1%	2	3	5	2%
5	1	--	1	>1%	1	--	1	>1%
6	--	--	--	--	--	1	1	>1%
Total	159	58	217		128	80	208	

About half of all third and fourth grade students had never experienced a mid-year move. Another third had experienced one mid-year move at any point in their school history. Less than 4% of third grade students and 9% of fourth grade students experienced several (three or more) mid-year school moves.

Another specific pattern of moving is represented by the “cyclers”. These are students who attend Clark, leave, and then return. These are the kinds of students described by Mrs. Duke above. While the student she tells about experienced a very high number of school moves in one year, his was not the typical mobility profile. An analysis of the student school attendance for the 2001/2002 school year showed very few students who left and returned to Clark during the same year. Only five third grade students (2%) and nine fourth grade students (4%) returned to Clark after

the 2001/2002 school year had started after having previously attended Clark at some point in their past school career. These students are the exception, but frequently mentioned by many of the teachers and administrators. Just as the “good students” are one small group, so are the “cyclers”, representing extremes of the mobile student continuum.

Race, Gender and TAAS

A primary concern about school mobility rested in administrators’ and many teachers’ beliefs that students who moved had a harder time passing the TAAS tests. The TAAS is a minimum-standards test measuring proficiency on specific objectives. I begin with an overview of which students took the TAAS tests, followed by passing rates for students by race and gender.

Table 4.4: Enrollment and TAAS by Race, 2001-2002

	3 rd Grade		4 th Grade	
Students enrolled during the school year TOTAL	217		208	
African American	187	86%	167	80%
Latino/a	24	11%	34	16%
Other	6	3%	6	3%
Students taking at least one TAAS test TOTAL	160		154	
African American	138	86%	126	82%
Latino/a	19	12%	25	16%
Other	3	2%	3	2%

Seventy-four percent of all third and fourth grade enrolled at Clark during the 2001-2002 school year took at least one TAAS test. It is these students who are considered in this section. 84% of the TAAS-takers were African American, 14% were Latino, and less than 2% were either white or Asian, grouped as Other in the table.

Clark Elementary scored in the “Acceptable” range, according to the Texas Education Association, which ranks all schools in the state based on the percentages of students who pass the TAAS tests. The acceptable rating means that more than 55% and fewer than 80% of all students and student sub-groups passed the TAAS. The sub-groups evaluated by TEA are white, Hispanic, African American and economic disadvantage. The next two tables show the passing rates on the TAAS by race and gender for Clark Elementary.

Table 4.5: Third Grade students by Race, Gender and TAAS

	African American girls	African American boys	Latinas (girls)	Latinos (boys)
Pass TAAS Reading	64 77.0%	37 67.3%	3 60%	12 85.7%
Mastery	32 38.5%	19 34.5%	2 40%	5 35.7%
Pass	32 38.5%	18 32.7%	1 20%	7 50.0%
Fail TAAS Reading	19 23.0%	18 32.7%	2 40%	2 14.3%
Total	83	55	5	14
Pass TAAS Math	61 74.4%	38 70.4%	4 80.0%	12 85.7%
Mastery	7 8.5%	3 5.6%	1 20.0%	1 7.1%
Pass	54 65.9%	35 64.8%	3 60.0%	11 78.9%
Fail TAAS Math	21 25.6%	16 29.6%	1 20.0%	2 14.3%
Total	82	54	5	14

Table 4.6: Fourth Grade students by Race, Sex and TAAS

	African American girls	African American boys	Latinas (girls)	Latinos (boys)
Pass TAAS Reading	63 92.6%	44 81.5%	7 70%	11 78.6%
Mastery	21 30.9%	8 14.8%	3 30.0%	4 28.6%
Pass	42 61.8%	36 66.7%	4 40.0%	7 50.0%
Fail TAAS Reading	5 7.4%	10 18.5%	3 30%	3 21.4%
Total	68	54	10	14
Pass TAAS Math	64 92.8%	42 80.8%	8 72.7%	14 100%
Mastery	4 5.8%	3 5.8%	1 9.9%	2 14.3%
Pass	60 87.0%	39 75.0%	7 63.6%	12 85.7%
Fail TAAS Math	5 7.2%	10 19.2%	3 27.3%	0 0.0%
Total	69	52	11	14
Pass TAAS Writing	64 90.1%	39 78.0%	6 60.0%	11 91.7%
Mastery	18 25.4%	4 8.0%	1 10.0%	6 50.0%
Pass	46 64.8%	35 70.0%	5 50.0%	5 41.7%
Fail TAAS Math	7 9.9%	11 22.0%	4 40.0%	1 8.3%
Total	71	43	10	12

Answering fewer than 70% of questions correctly results in a failing score, answering more than 70% of questions correctly results in a passing score, and mastery is defined as answering more than 71% correct for each specific objective on the test. We see that for both third and fourth grades African American boys failed all tests at greater rates than did African American girls. Not only did African American girls have higher passing rates, but they also had higher rates of mastery on the TAAS

tests, with the exception of fourth grade writing, in which African American boys and girls had the same rates. The percentage of Latinas (girls) failing was higher than for Latinos (boys) for both grades and all tests, although there were very few Latinas, so caution is prudent for interpreting these figures.

Mobility and TAAS

How does mobility relate to students' TAAS scores? Mobility can be defined in several ways. In this next section I will consider several different formulations of mobility, and how these configurations match with student TAAS scores.

Movers and Non-movers

First, I examine the difference between those students who have always attended Clark and those who have moved at least one time. This definition of mobility takes a broader view, not only defining mobility within one school year, but across a child's school history.

Table 4.7: Movers, Non-Movers and TAAS - Third Grade Students

	Non-Movers		Movers	
Mastery TAAS reading	24	43%	36	31%
Pass TAAS reading	15	27%	44	37%
Fail TAAS reading	13	24%	28	24%
Total	55		118	
Mastery TAAS math	7	13%	5	4%
Pass TAAS math	35	65%	71	60%
Fail TAAS math	8	15%	31	26%
Total	54		118	

Table 4.8: Movers, Non-Movers and TAAS - Fourth Grade Students

	Non-Movers		Movers	
Mastery TAAS reading	7	27%	31	25%
Pass TAAS reading	17	65%	73	59%
Fail TAAS reading	2	7%	19	15%
Total	26		123	
Mastery TAAS math	2	7%	9	7%
Pass TAAS math	21	81%	99	80%
Fail TAAS math	3	12%	15	12%
Total	26		123	
Mastery TAAS writing	5	20%	25	21%
Pass TAAS writing	17	68%	76	63%
Fail TAAS writing	3	12%	20	16%
Total	25		121	

For third grade students, those not moving had higher mastery rates for reading and math, but the same failing rates for reading. Non-movers failed the math TAAS at approximately half the rate of those students who had moved at least once. The fourth grade table also presents a mixed picture. Rates of mastery for all three tests are within 2% between movers and non-movers. The failing rate is the same for math, while non-movers failed the reading and writing tests less than movers. This finding was not what I expected, based on the reports of school personnel. I expected to find much stronger suggestion in the cross-tabulations for a connection between TAAS performance and mobility.

Length of time at Clark

The principal and some of the more experienced teachers stated that if they could keep the students at Clark for two years, the stability resulted in higher TAAS passing rates. This idea relates to the longevity of students in a particular school, and is a more nuanced idea than mere number of moves a child has experienced. Table 4.9 reflects the TAAS results from the 2001/2002 school year.

Table 4.9: Length of Time at Clark and TAAS - Third Grade Students

	Never Moved		2 consecutive years		less than 2 years at Clark	
		%		%		%
Pass TAAS Reading	39	75	25	71.4	55	75.3
Mastery (Y+)	24	[46.2]	10	[28.6]	26	[35.6]
Pass (Y)	15	[28.8]	15	[42.8]	29	[39.7]
Fail TAAS Reading	13	25	10	28.6	18	24.6
Total	52		35		73	
Pass TAAS Math	42	84	23	67.6	53	72.6
Mastery (Y+)	7	[14.0]	0	[0.0]	5	[6.8]
Pass (Y)	35	[70.0]	23	[67.6]	48	[65.8]
Fail TAAS Math	8	16	11	32.4	20	27.4
Total	50		34		73	

Table 4.10: Length of Time at Clark and TAAS – Fourth Grade Students

	Never Moved		2 consecutive years		less than 2 years at Clark	
		%		%		%
Pass TAAS Reading	24	92.3	46	82.1	58	86.6
Mastery (Y+)	7	[26.9]	13	[23.2]	18	[26.9]
Pass (Y)	17	[65.4]	33	[58.9]	40	[59.7]
Fail TAAS Reading	2	7.7	10	17.9	9	13.4
Total	26		56		67	
Pass TAAS Math	23	88.5	50	87.7	58	90.6
Mastery (Y+)	2	[7.7]	3	[5.3]	6	[9.4]
Pass (Y)	21	[80.8]	47	[82.5]	52	[81.3]
Fail TAAS Math	3	11.5	7	12.3	8	12.5
Total	26		57		64	
Pass TAAS Writing	22	88.0	45	81.8	56	84.8
Mastery (Y+)	5	[20.0]	10	[18.2]	15	[22.7]
Pass (Y)	17	[68.0]	35	[63.6]	41	[62.1]
Fail TAAS Writing	3	12.0	10	18.2	10	15.2
Total	25		55		66	

Of the third grade students who took the TAAS Reading test, 33% had always been at Clark Elementary, 22% had been at Clark for two consecutive years, while 45% had attended Clark for less than two years. We see that students who have always attended Clark score in the Mastery level in greater proportions compared with the more mobile groups of students. However, when we examine failing rates for reading, there is virtually no difference between the recently mobile students and those with consistent attendance at Clark. The results for the math TAAS test present a different picture, with consistent Clark attenders failing at lower rates than their mobile counterparts.

An interesting outcome is that third grade students who have attended Clark for two consecutive years do less well than students who have been at Clark for a shorter amount of time. This same pattern occurs for fourth grade students in reading and writing. This contradicts the prevailing thought that the more time a student has at Clark, the better for the TAAS scores. This could be the result of selection – which students comprise these groups? For further analysis, I compared the three groups of students by whether they had some “at-risk” designation. A student could be classified as at-risk for various reasons, including if they were below-level academically, had previously been retained, or were participating in the Communities In Schools program, which meant that they were eligible for a broad array of services from counseling to free school uniforms.

Table 4.11: Longevity at Clark and selected risk characteristics: Third Grade TAAS-takers

(N=172)

<i>Risk indicators</i>	Always at Clark N=54	At Clark 2 consecutive years N=40	At Clark less than 2 years N=78
Previously retained	1 (2%)	10 (25%)	7 (9%)
Special education	4 (7%)	7 (18%)	6 (8%)
Below level	6 (11%)	10 (25%)	14 (18%)
Enrolled in Communities in Schools	1 (2%)	2 (5%)	8 (10%)
Any at-risk indicator	11 (20%)	18 (45%)	25 (32%)
One or more mid-year moves	N/A	15 (38%)	67 (86%)
Previously attended within-district school	N/A	11 (28%)	20 (26%)

Table 4.12: Longevity at Clark and selected risk characteristics: Fourth Grade TAAS-takers

(N=154)

<i>Risk indicators</i>	Always at Clark N=25	At Clark 2 consecutive years N=59	At Clark less than 2 years N=70
Previously retained	2 (8%)	10 (16.9%)	15 (21.4%)
Special education	1 (4%)	5 (8.5%)	2 (2.9%)
Below level	7 (28%)	4 (6.8%)	10 (14.3%)
Enrolled in Communities in Schools	3 (12%)	12 (20.3%)	8 (11.4%)
Any at-risk indicator	12 (48%)	31 (52.5%)	25 (35.7%)
One or more mid-year moves	N/A	28 (47.5%)	49 (70.0%)
Previously attended within-district school	N/A	28 (47.5%)	27 (38.6)

Third grade students at Clark for two consecutive years had more previous retentions, higher participation in special education, and performed below level more than students in the other two categories. The fourth grade pattern is different, with those at Clark two consecutive years experiencing more participation in special education, but less retention and below level performance compared to students in the other categories. They were, however, more likely to be considered “at-risk” than students who have been at Clark for less time. In terms of mobility, they had experienced fewer mid-year moves, and nearly the same percent had come from outside the school district for third grade, and 10% more at fourth grade, as those students at Clark for less than two years. While not definitive, this data lends more

support for the argument that the students' individual backgrounds and achievement outweighed the influence of school mobility.

Students' previous school – within district or outside of district

Another aspect of school mobility relates to where the student last attended school. The conventional wisdom expressed within a district report was that if the student moved schools within the district, the TAAS scores were not affected (meaning that the student was not negatively affected, at least in this limited measure). The thinking went that this was due, in part, to the district schools following the same curricular plan. If a student switched schools within the district, the curricular gap would be minimized, as long as all schools followed the plan. In addition, there was a district-wide behavior and citizenship plan. This similarity would allow the incoming student to more quickly understand the rules at the new school, thus facilitating the transition.

Administrators and several teachers at Clark responded in disgust to the conclusions of the district report.

I know when he showed it to us I was like “what?” Who threw those numbers in a hat and let them fall out? Even with the mobility rate, come on. It just doesn't make sense. Because if the kids move a lot, and Stacey is the one who registers all the people that come in, and when they withdraw. And I don't think there's a single day that goes by that somebody is not either withdrawing a child, or bringing a child in, and most of the time its around the holidays, or the semester, or at the end or the beginning of the month, because that's when the rent specials take place. (Mrs. Madison)

They thought that the particular situation of Clark was being ignored. The main sticking point was that a lot of the new students came from outside the district, in part because Clark is located on the border with another school district. One teacher explains:

So one of the advantages, if your mobility rate is within the district, you get that information, so you don't have to test that child. But we are a border school - that's my point. We had a sister school in South Texas, in the lower Rio Grande Valley - Ramirez Elementary. And one night, we had all gone for dinner, and we were sitting there talking, and everything, and someone said, "But you don't have our problem - you don't have our problem - we are a border school. And we have children coming from Mexico who do not speak English at all." And of course, we said, well, we have that problem. But when they said "border school" that's when we started thinking about people coming from the other schools do not speak the language that we do.

(Mrs. Thompson)

Thus, when families moved to take advantage of apartment specials, they might move a few blocks but find themselves in another school district. They perceived the results of the report as downplaying the significance of mobility by concluding that essentially mobility did not matter (at least in terms of TAAS scores). Furthermore, the kind of mobility that Clark experienced, in which the majority of students arrived from another school district, was not taken into account. Of course, the "language" referred not to English, but to specific programs, shared information about student assessment, and curricular alignment.

As I collected data, I noted whether the student came to Clark from a school within or outside of the district. If information was missing in the cumulative folder, I checked the school district computerized record, which tracked whether the

student's last school was within the district. Tables 4.13 and 4.14 show three categories of students and TAAS results.

Table 4.13: Location of previous school and TAAS - Third Grade Students

	Always at Clark		Within District		Out of district	
TAAS Reading	N=52	32.5%	N=28	17.5%	N=80	50%
Mastery	24	46.2%	12	42.9%	24	30.0%
Pass	15	28.8%	13	46.4%	31	38.8%
Fail	13	25.0%	3	10.7%	25	31.3%
TAAS Math	N=50	31.8%	N=29	18.5%	N=78	49.7%
Mastery	7	14.0%	5	17.2%	0	0.0%
Pass	35	70.0%	17	58.6%	54	69.2%
Fail	8	16.0%	7	24.1%	24	30.8%

Table 4.14: Location of previous school and TAAS - Fourth Grade Students

	Always at Clark		Within District		Out of district	
TAAS Reading	N=26	17.4%	N=53	35.6%	N=70	47.0%
Mastery	7	26.9%	12	22.6%	19	27.1%
Pass	17	65.4%	30	56.6%	43	61.4%
Fail	2	8.0%	11	20.8%	8	11.4%
TAAS Math	N=26	17.4%	N=52	34.9%	N=71	47.7%
Mastery	2	8.0%	3	5.4%	6	8.5%
Pass	21	80.8%	42	80.8%	57	80.3%
Fail	3	11.5%	7	13.5%	8	11.3%
TAAS Writing	N=25	17.1%	N=51	34.9%	N=70	47.9%
Mastery	5	20.0%	10	19.6%	15	21.4%
Pass	17	68.0%	29	56.9%	47	67.1%
Fail	3	12.0%	12	23.5%	8	11.4%

First, we see that of the third and fourth grade students taking all TAAS tests nearly half (47-50% depending on the particular test) came from outside the Clark school district. For third grade students, 17.5% came from another school within the

district, compared with approximately one-third of fourth grade students. One-third of third grade students and 17% of fourth grade test takers had been at Clark for their entire school histories. These numbers provide support for the concern that the district report did not accurately reflect the situation at Clark in terms of the pattern of student mobility. The test scores present conflicting evidence, however, for whether coming from within the district helps students' TAAS performance. For third grade students, those who arrived from outside the district fared less well than students who transferred within Greene ISD, both in terms of mastery and failing rates for both reading and math tests. Fourth grade students who had previously attended an out-of-district school performed *better*, as a group, than students arriving at Clark from another Greene ISD school. This was true both for higher mastery rates and lower failing rate for reading, math and writing TAAS tests. We see school personnel correctly assessing that more students arrive at Clark from outside the district, but not necessarily correct in the concern that this facet of students' experience directly relates to students TAAS scores.

Students who failed multiple TAAS tests

Perhaps mobility is more of a factor for students who failed multiple TAAS tests. To examine this, I analyzed the third grade students who failed both TAAS tests (reading and math) and fourth grade students who had failed two or all three TAAS tests (reading, math and writing). Table 4.15 presents data about this group of students.

Table 4.15: Multiple TAAS Failers: Selected Characteristics

	3 rd Grade Students N=22		4 th Grade Students N=17	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Female	13	59%	7	41%
Below grade level	10	45%	3	18%
Previously retained	2	9%	5	29%
African American	20	91%	12	71%
Latino	2	9%	5	29%
Mobility Indicators				
Only attended Clark	5	23%	1	6%
Attended two or more schools	17	77%	16	94%
Experienced one or more mid-year moves	13	59%	10	59%
At Clark two consecutive years	11	50%	10	59%
Left Clark and returned	0	0%	1	6%
First year at Clark (new to the school)	8	36%	4	24%

Fifty-nine (59) third grade students failed one or both TAAS tests. Twenty-two third grade students (37%) of those failing any test failed **both** the TAAS reading and math tests. (This does not include students who are enrolled in special education classes. These students do not take the TAAS tests.) More girls than boys failed both tests. Twenty of the students were African American and two were Latino. Nearly

half (10) were labeled “below level” by their teachers, meaning that they were performing under the specified grade level requirement for reading and math.

Fewer fourth grade students than third grade students failed one or more TAAS tests. Thirty seven fourth grade students failed one or more TAAS tests. Seven students, or 19% of those failing any test failed **all three** (reading, math and writing) tests. An additional ten students failed two TAAS tests. In contrast with the third grade students, more boys than girls failed multiple tests. Twelve of the students were African American and five were Latino. Only three were labeled “below level” by their teachers, while nine were considered to be “on level”.

How do the mobility histories intersect with this group of students who performed poorly on both TAAS tests? The “if only we could keep them here for two consecutive years” argument is not particularly convincing in this case, where half of third grade students and slightly more than half of fourth grade students who failed two or more TAAS tests attended Clark for the previous two years. In addition, of students who failed multiple tests, only 36% of third grade students and 24% of fourth grade students were new to Clark Elementary. This does not support the idea that if students are at Clark for two consecutive years they will pass the TAAS test. We see that the students who failed multiple tests were not necessarily those who were new to the school.

In contrast, only 5 (23%) of the 22 third grade students and one (6%) of the 17 fourth grade students had only ever attended Clark, while the remaining students had attended two or more schools. Thus, the students who had attended more than one

school fared less well on the TAAS test, representing a greater percentage of the students who failed multiple tests. We also see that a greater number of students (77% of third grade students and 59% of fourth grade students) who failed multiple tests experienced one or more mid-year moves.

The intersection of short tenure and previous school attendance

What about the *intersection* of being from outside of the Greene school district in combination with a short tenure at Clark Elementary? According to the teachers' logic, this should produce negative outcomes for the TAAS test. Table 4.16 contains the percentages of third and fourth grade students who failed at least one TAAS test by time at Clark Elementary and previous district attendance.

Table 4.16: Students who failed at least one TAAS test by tenure and location of previous school

	Previous school NOT in Greene ISD	Previous school WITHIN Greene ISD
<i>3rd grade students (N=59)</i>		
>2 consecutive years	24 (40.7%)	4 (6.8%)
Here 2 consecutive years	11 (18.6%)	4 (6.8%)
Always at Clark	16 (27.1%)	
<i>4th grade students (N=37)</i>		
>2 consecutive years	10 (27.0%)	6 (16.2%)
Here 2 consecutive years	6 (16.2%)	10 (27.0%)
Always at Clark	5 (13.5%)	

The single largest group of third grade students who failed at least one TAAS test experienced the combination of less than two years at Clark and having last attended

a school outside of the Greene district. Initially, this seems to support the idea that TAAS failure is connected to lacking enough continuity – both in terms of time, as well as any continuity offered within a school district. However, the next largest group of TAAS failers are those students who have always been at Clark. The fourth grade pattern is quite different, with students who had been at Clark for two consecutive years from within the district just as likely to fail as those who had been at Clark for less than two years from outside Greene ISD.

In the absence of a longitudinal design with multiple controls, it is impossible to determine the likelihood that school moves affect students' TAAS results. What is important, however, is that the data presented here does not corroborate teacher and administrator perceptions that the high mobility directly relates to lower TAAS scores – at least not in very many dimensions.²¹ Dividing the data in multiple ways shows little evidence of the teachers' assertions that the mobile children were worse off academically. Of course, using TAAS scores alone are not a comprehensive picture of a student's educational abilities. However, they are the “high-stakes” measure which exerts much pressure on teachers and schools, and the outcome with which teachers at Clark were very concerned.

²¹ It is also possible that this one year of data was somehow different from previous years. Teachers' perceptions may have been influenced from earlier years in which the mobility rate was higher.

Social consequences of mobility: New students and the classroom

In addition to academic concerns, teachers also talked about social aspects related to the constant flux of students. Ms. Martin, in her second year as a third grade teacher, shared about how she is sad to see her students leave, and how getting new students can affect the classroom in positive or negative ways, depending on the student.

I've had eight students who have withdrawn [this was in December], and it kind of upsets me with the students that leave because I've had them for so long – they get to know me, and I know them, and the goals are already set down. And then when a new student comes in and has to start from scratch. Not that I don't care about the new student – I'm willing to do it – but its easier once you've gone this far, and Christmas is about to come, and then you get a new student like I did today [she laughs]. And you have to go through that again...I haven't decided how it affects the students, because I know it probably upsets them when it's a good friend that leaves, or that moves, but a lot of times, they may still be real close by, so they can still play with them...It really depends on the student, you know, a new one can come in and just totally affect the climate of your classroom, if you get a personality that doesn't match. But sometimes, like the last couple of students that I've gotten, I absolutely love them... They are going to fit really really well. (Ms. Martin)

This teacher points to how some of the mobility occurs in the immediate area – that although a child moves, they may still be close enough to play with their friends, but out of the school attendance zone. Her assessment of the new students – that they can influence her class for the better or for the worse – is an idea held by the majority of the other teachers.

She also mentions the students' adjustment to the goals of her class. Other teachers referred to this as the “language of classroom rules”. These are part of the

routine which helps the students join with the class and are not taught all at once, but occur over time, especially with the case of the behavior and social skills curriculum which Clark incorporates throughout all grade levels. New children entering the classroom lack this foundation that has been accruing over time.

Despite the frustration caused by the frequent disruption of new students coming into the class and others leaving, most of the teachers make a conscious effort not to make the child's mobile status itself into a negative marker. The mobile students are not singled out; in some cases, the teachers do not want to know the exact background of the students they receive into their classrooms. A fourth grade teacher, who had one of the classes with the highest number of mobile students, put it this way:

I think it's harder on the student than it is on the teachers. I think we adapt easier than kids do, and we see it more as, you know, it's my job to teach whoever comes in – to see where they are, where they've been, where I need to get them to, to be successful.... I normally don't even go to the cum[ulative] folders to see okay, where have you been? How many schools have you been in? You know, before you got here. I don't even check that. I just know, hey, I gotta teach this child, and I do my testing to see where I think they may be, reading-wise, math-wise, what have you. (Mrs. Adair)

But other teachers take the opposite approach, and can recite the past school histories of many of their mobile students. For them, knowing as much as they can helps them best teach the child. Another veteran teacher, who had a very gentle demeanor throughout the interview and my interactions with her, pointed out, very protectively and emphatically, that a six year old does not have a say in whether they move, and

that you deal with what you have in your students. This teacher did say that it would be good if the child could do their entire elementary years at one school, but, with a simple matter-of-factness, rather than resignation, explained it is not usually the case.

It is easy to imagine how a school move disrupts the relationships for individual children. Suddenly, the child must develop relationships with new teachers, peers and other school staff. One of the social service staff provided a nutshell assessment of what he sees as the social risks involved with school moves:

I think that the long-term consequence of the mobility that we have at the school is that you're going to have students who are not going to be able to attach very well, for long periods of times, or even find other people or other institutions trustworthy because they're not there long enough to build that relationship with friends and peers as well as teachers, as well as...any type of person – mentors – because you know, the whole thing with mentoring is time. It's all about time. The more time you spend with someone, the more time you have to work with a particular person, the more chance you have to have a positive result, usually.

(Mr. Scully)

In addition, mobility affects children who do not move. On the first day of school, I observed a fourth grade classroom. The students were going around the circle each sharing something as a way to get acquainted. Students shared things like “my favorite food is hot wings”, “I like football”, “zebras are my favorite animal” and “I'm sitting next to my best friend.” At one point, a soft-spoken boy shared that he missed his best friend who had gone to Clark last year but does not go there anymore. This interaction was striking to me in that this child, although he has not moved, is negatively affected by the mobility that occurs around him, in this case, the loss of a

best friend. This may or may not affect this child's test scores or other quantitative measures, but it certainly has an emotional impact for some children who are left behind by friends who move away.²²

Another social service staff said that each child responds differently, but that she sometimes works with those who do not handle the transition well. She gave an example of a second grade boy who was very upset to be in a new school. They met for lunch several times and made a plan for him to be just as happy in his new school as he had been in his former school. The plan included things like making new friends and getting to know his teacher. Things progressed well and the idea of a plan seemed to help him cope with his new situation. He was adjusting to Clark and feeling better. Unfortunately, he told her soon after that he would be moving during the winter break. In this case, the student was fortunate to have someone help him through this transition, and he was sent to the case worker because his crying in the classroom alerted the teacher to his need for some assistance in making an adjustment. Not all students, however, exhibit this kind of behavior.

It is worthy of note that these concerns with student's individual adjustment were most often made by members of the social service team, because this was not

²² Research by Heywood, Thomas and White (1997) indicates that stable students who are in classrooms with mobile students do not suffer, at least in terms of test scores.

the predominant view espoused by the majority of teachers.²³ Teachers repeatedly described students as “used to it”:

What’s so amazing about our kids is that they’re used to change, because they are used to moving, getting up and going to different schools – so they can adjust to it. And that’s what I notice. Now some can’t – but most of them can – because that’s their lifestyle – the mobility – they’re constantly moving. ...Like I said, they are amazing as far as adjusting to all this mobility and inconsistency.

(Mrs. Paulson)

Mr. Mathison, who has been working at Clark for six years, characterized his students as “moving from school to school, having to pick up and go, it’s like it’s no big deal to them”.

In addition, some teachers did not seem to think mobility had major ramifications in the social realm. Instead, moving could represent new opportunities, for example, it might mean the family had moved for a better job. Other school staff who had come from military backgrounds talked about mobility more matter-of-factly, something that is the norm, rather than a traumatic experience. Several teachers, like Ms. Martin’s comments earlier, observed that since some of the children moved within a small area, the children could maintain relationships with friends from their former neighborhoods. (I do not know whether this happened or not.) The perception that the children “are used to it” is a very different interpretation of what the social service staff see as isolated children who cannot or decide not to

²³ One exception was Mr. Stewart. He thought that mobility, especially if frequent, may result in “children who will not even risk becoming involved. They will not bond with teachers or their classmates.” (Mr. Stewart was the teacher noted earlier in this chapter who overestimated the amount of mobility at Clark Elementary.)

form attachments. (And perhaps the social service staff only sees the students who really are having more problems fitting in at the school.)

Influencing school moves

Although mobility is such a pervasive theme at the school, teachers have vastly different opinions about their ability to influence the situation. Some express the idea that there is nothing that can be done, it is simply the circumstance, and you deal with it and respond to it the best way you are able. This is not to say that they are necessarily fatalistic or have given up on the students. Many of these teachers go far beyond their job description to help the students they have. Others suggest that the solution lies in a broader school-wide approach, such as the principal talking with the apartment owners in the area, or negotiating school attendance boundaries and policies with the school board.

There are several examples of other teachers, however, who talk about ways they can and have proactively worked to stem school moving. Some teachers, if they have a supportive relationship with the parent, feel comfortable suggesting alternatives to moving the child away from Clark. Of course, this is highly dependent both on the reason for the school move, as well as the specific relationship with the parent(s) involved. Not all teachers have the kind of relationship that would support this kind of action.

Relationships between parents and teachers at Clark vary widely. There are many single parent families at the school, and many teachers acknowledge that they face many pressures. Some parents work more than one job and still do not have a lot of money to pay the bills and make ends meet. Some teachers understand why the parents are not as involved at the school as they would like them to be, and try to stay in contact in other ways. Other teachers are much more negative about the lack of positive connections with parents and cite instances of verbal abuse by parents, not returning notes or phone calls, and not coming for parent-teacher conferences or other events at the school.²⁴ While these examples are not the norm, neither are they rare. It seems that the teacher's attitude toward parental involvement is a key component affecting the relationship – as is the parent's willingness and ability to communicate with the teacher.

One fourth grade teacher, who describes her students' parents as "working with me the best that they can", related an example of a parent who told her in the beginning of the school year that her daughter would be going to a different school.

She's going to a new school? What are you talking about? She's been here since the beginning – and now y'all are moving her? You know, she wants to stay, and finish up with her friends, and so I'm like, "where do you guys live? Where y'all moving to? And I said, can you get her here on time and can you pick her up on time? Because as long as you can do that, the district will allow you to keep them here... even though it is out of the zone. So that's one way. You don't want to get into their personal business, but if you have built some type of relationship with your parents – when they say "hey, we're leaving", you know, then maybe you can ask and say "I'm not trying to get into your business or anything, but do you have a specific reason why y'all

²⁴ I discuss school-family connections in more detail in Chapter 5.

are leaving? Is there no way that you can stay and finish off the school year? And depending, some may stay, and some may not, but depending on the situation, sometimes the person can be talked into trying to make it through the rest of the year. If not, of course we understand, people have to do what they have to do to help themselves, you know, make it better for themselves. (Mrs. Adair)

In this example, it is evident that the teacher and parent share a certain level of rapport, since the parent came to her to tell her that they would be leaving. (Often, students simply are withdrawn from school by their parents with no mention to the teacher who finds out from a crossed out name on a roll sheet.) And, the teacher felt comfortable pursuing the matter by asking questions about the reason for the move. In part, the teacher felt strongly because the child has been at the school for her entire grade school career, something fairly rare at Clark Elementary. She was able to communicate the district attendance policy and present an alternative to the parent to promote school stability for the student. Although the district policy is written in the handbook that is distributed to all parents in the beginning of the year materials, it consists of a few lines buried in the middle of a dry, boring collection of policies and procedures. Even some teachers are unaware of the policy.

In this case, the relationship between the teacher and parent is strong enough to handle somewhat personal questions by the teacher. The rapport enables the sharing of information which can have far-reaching effects for the student – the difference between continued school stability – and the implicitly positive social and academic consequences – and the inevitable disruption that a school move would bring. As the teacher makes clear, there is a line not to cross, that of “getting into

personal business”; this line has to be negotiated constantly. This interaction demonstrates that it is not only the parent who has to be receptive and willing to work with a teacher, but that the teacher also has to feel comfortable going out on a limb at times.

“It affects the students more than the teachers”, but....

Several teachers emphasized that moving is much harder on the students than the teachers, because the teachers were better equipped as adults to adapt. While this rings true, (albeit different from those teachers who focused on how the students are “used to it”), it is important to explore how the high student mobility rate affected the teachers. The mobility exacerbated the difficulties that accompany low-income, low parental education populations. Because of the needs of the students, teachers said that it was essential to care about the students.

You know when you come here what type of kids you’re going to be dealing with. And to at least give it two or three years. I think that that shows they care for children a lot, and not just the job. Because that’s the thing – the area – the disadvantages, you know. I guess the environment around the school. And the lifestyle of the kids. So many of them have problems at home, and the majority of them do, and it drains you, because you spend your time trying to help them and solve their problems. And very little time is left to actually teach them because they have all this emotional baggage with everything that they have going on, and you know, I think that’s the disadvantage that brings the school down, because you know, everyone works so hard to develop the kids, academics and everything, but there’s so much that stops them that they have to go through at home, that stops them from becoming as smart as they can be, and you know, as focused as they can be. Cause then it gives the overall school a negative reputation, because of the discipline and different things like that. And the mobility of the kids, and all the apartments, and the single families, and all that.

(Ms. Raymond)

Helping the students emotionally, socially and academically is often a very tiring and draining experience. The added burden of students coming and going often adds frustration.

It makes your job very difficult. Because some kids, let's say, for example, I recently received a new kid – Friday before last, so you know, I don't know where he is. I just received his cum[ulative] folder this week. You're just at a loss for where you should go, where you should start with this kid, you know, it's frustrating. Really frustrating. It makes your job very difficult and it's frustrating because you feel helpless – like there's nothing you can do.

(Mr. Hawkins)

One of the third grade teachers thinks that mobility can be a challenge for the teacher in terms of the commitment she has to her students. You want to keep your students, she said, so that you can “watch your seed bloom – watch our hard work – the fruits of our labor.” She continued by asking, “If you don't know for sure that that student is still going to be here, are you going to put that ‘all’ that you have into it? Not to say that you know all the time. I'm just saying it could be a motivation issue, which is why I think it's a challenge.” Teachers did not freely admit that they invested less in newer students, and I did not personally see any evidence of this. While it is unlikely that teachers would purposely take such an attitude, it is easy to see that relationships build and strengthen over time – the more time, the more opportunities to develop increased knowledge or a particular students' talents, abilities and areas that need improvement. The teachers' frequent recital “If only we could keep them” speaks to this.

Discussion

This research points to multiple perceptions and ideas about how student mobility affects the school. At Clark, with a large number of students moving in and out, student mobility is a pervasive part of the atmosphere that leaves no classroom untouched. This provides an opportunity to explore the various ways that teachers perceive and respond to the challenges that result.

High student mobility affects the entire school and contributes to what makes Clark a challenging place to teach; the mobility is but one piece of the many challenges the teachers have to address. Not surprising, it is the teachers who have more experience who do a better job of helping their students (including the mobile ones) pass the state achievement test. However, situations such as high mobility, because of the frustration and added layer of complexity within the classroom, sometimes help nudge teachers out of the school and into another school with fewer social problems. Several of the newer teachers told me they were thinking about finding another school for next year, one that was not so hard, where fewer students faced the constellation of poverty, geographic mobility and other instability.

Residential mobility was highlighted as a problem and made into an important academic issue in large part through the context of high-stakes testing. The pressure of TAAS, and the public comparison between schools using test results, made it convenient to look at the causes for why the school was not doing as well as the principal had hoped. Student mobility was an often cited reason for the challenges

Clark faced in the TAAS arena, yet as we see from the data presented earlier, there is not a clear correlation for many subgroups which link mobility and failing the TAAS tests.

Despite the widespread belief that mobility was one of the biggest challenges facing Clark, there were relatively few of the “remedies” that educational research often recommends – things like welcoming and departure rituals, welcome packets for students and families and the like. When I asked the teachers if they discussed mobility during professional development meetings, they said that they really did not address that topic. It seems that this omission occurred for two main reasons. First, many teachers said that the students “are used to it” and adapt fairly easily. That moving affects children on a social and emotional level is given lip-service, but the rhetoric that children “are used to it” is the overriding perspective. Generally, it was the underlying causes of the move that were the teachers’ focus in terms of the emotional affect on the child. This view does not account for the importance of the break in social relationships which researchers have found, regardless of the reason for the move. For example, Tucker, Marx and Long (1998) found that for children of single parents, any school move was detrimental. I do not discount the teachers’ perspectives that the kids are “used to it.” Many at Clark experience this kind of disruption all too frequently, but that does not eradicate the effects on the child. In part, the sheer quantity of mobility in a sense “normalizes” the experience.

The second reason is that the problem of student mobility was viewed as merely *one kind* of instability. Students also experienced disruptions caused by

changes in their families, such as divorce or separation, or a parent going to jail, or moving in with a relative or friend for a short time. In this sense, a student moving schools was simply another kind of change that happens, and the situation of the move had significant influence on how the child responded to the mobility. For example, if the student moved to Clark because their parents had found a new job, this was different than in the case of a student who had to move because his father died and he and his mother moved in with relatives in the school attendance zone.

I was discovering that although residential mobility *seemed* to be the largest challenge facing Clark elementary, perhaps it was simply an easy label to apply – a kind of shorthand for the collection of social issues the students at Clark faced. In addition, taking into account the perception that Clark was an “outsider” within the school district, it may have been a more politically correct thing to say than emphasizing the poverty and the racial composition of the school. The principal could talk about the mobility problem which could deflect focus away from Clark as the school with the highest African-American student population in the district.

In addition, having high student mobility was a way for Clark to emphasize the needs of the student body, which assists in determining need and therefore qualification for various grants. The principal actively sought extra funds for the school, and presenting the campus as full of needy children helps get grants.

Residential mobility was almost advertised to visitors. For example, I was at Clark one day for a special mathematics presentation by a motivational speaker. Another woman from a different school within Greene ISD was there to see the presentation,

and we struck up a conversation. That Clark had such a high mobility rate was one of the first things she mentioned. I found this statement telling, in that she had been told this by the principal and had recognized it as a distinguishing mark of the school.

It became clear to me while in the field that residential mobility was not the main “story” occurring. Teachers and the principal spoke about the need to care for their students, and how that was an important component for a successful educational experience, especially in light of the many needs they saw in the students and their families. In the next chapter I explore how teachers and administrators talked about what it means to care, particularly in the largely African American student context, and how that connects to the perceptions of the students and their families.

CHAPTER FIVE

Culture and Class: Responding to students' families

This chapter is about how teachers at Clark Elementary responded to the realities of many families who were living in poverty, had low education levels and negative experiences with school. As discussed in the previous chapter, many families also encountered the pressures accompanying residential moves, as well as the stresses that come from working hard to make ends meet financially. This combination may result in reduced options for other ways to spend one's time – such as at your child's school. This chapter focuses on the connection between teachers' perceptions of parents and how teachers talk about their approach to caring for the students in their charge. I begin with teacher perceptions of parents' home circumstances and briefly describe teacher experiences of parental involvement. The use of family language in the classroom is one teacher response which directly relates to the perceptions of the students' home contexts and carries multiple meanings. Next I explore how teachers defined “caring” for the students. Ways teachers cared for and responded to their students were serving as middle-class role models, teaching Standard English, and transmitting certain standards of behavior, each as a way to correct “poor” behavior.

How do teachers care?

School is a primary arena for the promotion of caring – caring is not a program or activity, but is grounded in relationships. Teachers are often the focal point in research about caring in large part because they have primary influence in shaping the classroom environment. A large body of literature describes various teacher actions which exhibit facets of care for students. These include being attentive and responsive to the needs of others (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1993; Alder and Moulton, 1998), helping increase a sense of personal competence in students (Mayeroff, 1971; Kohl, 1984; Noddings, 1992), using dimensions of authoritative parenting such as setting clear expectations (Baumrind, 1991; Wentzel, 1997; Alder and Moulton, 1998), and showing respect for students (Larrivee, 2000; Bosworth, 1995). Empathy for students is another dimension of teacher caring (McCroskey, 1992; Alder and Moulton, 1998; Larrivee, 2000) which is closely related to knowing students on a personal level (Thayer-Bacon and Bacon, 1996; Sickle and Spector, 1996; Alder and Moulton, 1998; Ferreira and Bosworth, 2001; Bosworth, 1995). Other aspects of teacher caring relate directly to teaching, including making curriculum relevant to students' lives (Pang, Rivera and Mora, 1999; Cummins, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Noddings, 1992; Dewey, 1938/1963; Thayer-Bacon and Bacon, 1996; Hale, 2001), positive reinforcement and helping with school work (Bosworth, 1995; Ferreira and Bosworth, 2001) and not giving up on students, but at times providing extra assistance to student beyond academic concerns (Noblit, Rogers and McCadden, 1995; Bosworth, 1995).

Caring encompasses the ways individuals and institutions protect young people and invest in their development, and how young people in turn protect the rights and interest of others and ultimately support the ongoing development of their social and civic communities (Chaskin and Rauner, 1995:672). In sum, caring is not simply defined. Instead, caring embraces complexity as the needs of individual students and circumstances are paramount in creating a caring environment. Caring also requires emotional investment as the caring teacher protects and nurtures the students in her or his charge.

The connection between teacher ideas of “caring” and social class is important to explore. School is often “contested terrain” between families and educators (Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978). Differences in race, ethnicity and social class between teachers, parents and students can complicate these relationships (see for example Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999; Majors, 2001; Shujaa, 1994). Much literature addresses the idea of a “cultural mismatch” between teachers and students which can result in poorer outcomes for children’s educational experiences and outcomes. Yet we cannot ignore how differences in social class also affect the perceptions of teachers and how they demonstrate their care for the students in their charge. The caring relationship formed between teachers and students has been posited as a vital component of helping students experience education in positive ways (Noddings 1984,1992). Race and class both shape these ideas about caring.

Teachers’ perceptions of parents not only shape how the teachers relate to their students, but also hint at the attitudes about which parents can be authentic

educational partners (Lightfoot, 1978). Authentic partnership, then, would include “culturally relevant” teaching as well as sensitivity to ideas about class and how that shapes teachers’ perceptions and actions. An emphasis on achieving “culturally relevant” teaching by matching race/ethnicity can be one piece of the puzzle, but not the whole solution. Simply having teachers of the same race/ethnicity as the students does not erase how class affects teacher-student-parent relationships. Clark Elementary provides an opportunity to examine perceptions of social class within a predominantly African American school that has a majority of African American teachers. In this chapter I focus on first through fourth grade teachers, all of whom were African American except for one third grade teacher, one content specialist, and one fine arts teacher.²⁵

The need for “caring” teachers: problems at home

The concept of caring and what it means in the Clark context is important primarily because “caring” was an often used term by the principal and many of the teachers. This signaled something that administrators and teachers thought important and vital in terms of accomplishing their goal of teaching. In discussions with the principal, she remained consistent in her view that “you can be taught how to teach, but not how to love kids.” Accordingly, she selects people who she thinks “really care about the kids - have a heart for the kids”. The principal underscored the particular need to care as it relates to a student population that had more than its share of

²⁵ All interview excerpts in this chapter are from African American teachers unless otherwise noted.

difficult home situations. She related the following incident during one of our earliest meetings:

They look for teachers who have compassion, because you can be taught how to teach, not how to love kids. Then they gave an example about a boy who was kicked out of his house because he got too many “Xs” [bad marks] in his conduct folder. The mother had told him that he could not come home, and when the school personnel talked to her about it, she said that he should pack up his things and that she would call Children’s Protective Services to come and get him. She said that she had grown up in foster care and it wasn’t that bad. The principal, counselor and teacher all agreed to take him home for the upcoming four-day weekend. The mother agreed, and then broke down crying - obviously not able to cope. The principal and assistant principal told us that these are heartbreaking stories that they face often. [field notes 1/13/1999]

In addition to this account by the principal, many teachers spoke of the need to be “caring” or to “love kids”. One of the veteran teachers at Clark describes the need for caring teachers:

Our strength is that the principal gets the teachers that she knows care about the children. That’s our strength right there. She will definitely get rid of those who don’t love to spend time [laughs]. Or they will get rid of themselves. Because it’s very challenging - because a lot of these kids have a lot of baggage with them. Baggage that if I were their age, I wouldn’t want to be here. Because there’s no way that I could ever handle it - they’re a challenge. (Mrs. Myers)

The “baggage” to which this teacher refers stems from a combination of single parenthood, poverty and other situations the families in the school community face. This combination of challenges is viewed by the majority of school personnel as the biggest obstacle for educating their students. Teachers described multiple facets of the children’s home experiences:

When you know the situation, that's where you improvise. Because everybody does not have a stay-at-home mom that they can go home to that can help them with their homework. And that's why I say you have to know the child, as a teacher, you have to know everything about them. (Ms. Barnes)

This interview excerpt, in stating “everybody does not have a stay-at-home mom” identifies a large part of the school population, many of whom are single mothers. In addition, of the two parent families, teachers noted that many times both parents had to work to make ends meet. Other teachers indicated that the problems went beyond having a single-parent who was working and did not have time to stay at home with their child. One teacher in this excerpt describes a segment of the student body who suffers due to maternal neglect:

[Some] when they get [to school] are sick to their stomach because they haven't eaten, and they didn't eat because they got here late, and they got here late because their mother was out all night – you know – all these stories that I hear. It's amazing. It's a real life experience, for sure. (Ms. Smyth, white fine arts teacher)

Other teachers and school staff described some parents as doing drugs, incarcerated, or simply “just not there”. For whatever reason, whether legitimate need or some level of neglect, the consequence for many children is that they are left to fend for themselves:

You know, the kids basically take care of themselves. I see it every day - I see my kids coming to class, and their clothes, they look like they maybe slept in what they wore last night and woke up and came to school. Hair not combed. Teeth haven't been brushed. And you know, things like that. (Mrs. Taylor)

Most teachers were quick to point out that parents had a variety of circumstances that affected their communication and involvement with the school. For example, as mentioned in the previous section, often cited situations were that there were many single parents whose working schedule sometimes made coming to school meetings impossible. Other circumstances included incarcerated parents, drug use and parents who seemed to be reluctant to interact with teachers or other school staff. The majority of teachers were reluctant to group all the parents together – they had several explanations for why parents were not involved.

Parental Involvement

Many speculated that the combination of young parents and low education resulted in feelings of intimidation with teachers and other school staff.²⁶ Most teachers did not view most parents as active educational partners – for various reasons. This attitude was acknowledged by the administration. During a team meeting one morning, one of the assistant principals gave a “state of the third and fourth grade” speech, humorously referring to the Presidential state of the union which had occurred the night before. In his assessment of the mid-year progress of the older students, the assistant principal reiterated the theme of “no excuses.” He specifically referred to the lack of parental participation. He told the teachers that

²⁶ The school tried various ways to increase the communication between parents and school staff with the aim of helping break down that barrier. Monthly “open” meetings with the administrators, a parent center, and educational offerings for the parents are examples. However, despite these programs, only a small number of parents participated.

even if there was no support from the parents, that didn't matter. It was up to the teachers to get the children to learn. The "no excuses" mantra was heard often, starting from the very beginning of the school year during the first kick-off in-service. In her address to the faculty, the principal wove this idea through her initial comments to set the tone for the year.

Most teachers told me that the vast majority of parents care about their children, but note that the situations the parents face may affect their ability to be involved in their children's education in certain ways. As one teacher said, "the parents do what they have to do". Several teachers, in contrast, talked about how a certain segment of the parents simply did not care about their children, at least to the extent or in the ways that the teacher thought they should. One fourth grade teacher wishes that parents would take more of an active interest in their children's education and also their lives:

What I would want to see more of would be the parents actually – and not even so much as in the classroom – just at home – if they would sit them down for thirty minutes to an hour a day – well, maybe not an hour ...even if it's not a formal sitting down at the table – just some form of "how was your day?" Or just letting them know that okay, well, you know, school is important, and your work is important, and you need to follow direction in class and uh – helping with their homework, or at least letting them know that you care if they have homework.

(Ms. Banks)

Here it seems to be the assumption that the parents do not ask about the child's day and are not concerned with the day to day experiences of the child, including whether or not they have homework. (How she knows what does or does not happen within

the home remains a mystery.) This same teacher continued to explain that in her estimation the parents are not consistent. One day they may come to school and check on the progress of their student, but then not ask the child if they have homework. She said that many do not sign the weekly spelling test which is an indication to her that they did not look at it. Part of the idea embedded in this teacher's comments is that parents do not instill the value of education and respect for the teacher.

Some teachers had very negative experiences with some of the parents of their students. One teacher, Mrs. Taylor, told me that she tells other teachers in her grade level not to call the parents if there is a problem, because the situation worsens when the parents do not take action. This second grade teacher explained that she likes to deal with things within her classroom as much as possible. She had contacted a parent about a child's misbehavior and the child told her that his momma didn't do anything about it. She talked with the mother and told her what the child had said. Even though the mother disagreed with the child's version, the teacher concluded that the mother did not take action and therefore created more problems with a child who would not listen to her in the classroom. She concluded the story with a stark portrait of the parents at Clark, "So I think what it is – the parents are single parents, and a lot of them are on drugs, and incarcerated like a lot of the fathers. Some of the kids don't even see their fathers. And a lack of education, also".

Another teacher expressed her frustration and opinion about working with parents who did not "care" about their children's educational progress:

Uh, well, I've had a lot of parents complain about different things – because I don't – like I said, I don't care. If you don't come up here and see about your child yourself, then I'm not going to call you three or four times a day to cater to you. No. Come up here and see about your child...I'll give you something every day to let you know what your child has done, but if that's not a warning back to you, you know, to come up and see about your child, I'm not going to call you. I don't feel it necessary. You know, you don't care enough to even call me, than why should I? You know, I care about the kids, but I don't really care about the parents. I'm sorry, but I just don't. Because I don't feel like they care enough about their children. (Ms. Gilbert)

She continued by acknowledging that her comments were “kind of harsh” but that the situation with parents was like caring about someone who does not care about you.

She also talked about the lack of respect she perceives from some of the parents, and the frustration that although she is supposed to respect the parents, she does not sense the same respect from the families in return.

In the past, many teachers at Clark Elementary were very upset about the lack of what they perceived to be positive parental involvement. They felt that at times there was “negative” parental involvement. A large poster hung prominently in the library during the first year of my observation at the school. It had been created during an in-service meeting, and teachers could write anonymous comments about the school, the students' families, and the community. The comments reflected two main thoughts about parents – either that they were not involved enough, or that they were involved in negative ways. One teacher wrote: “parents don't have time, kids are unsupervised, no one to help with homework.” Another added, “have to teach kids manners, many are in crisis - in survival mode”. More than one teacher wrote

about parents coming to the school and being verbally abusive. Several summed up their thoughts, “I just want to teach.”

These kinds of anonymous comments provide a slightly different picture than some of my interview responses which tended to present a more balanced view of parents. Perhaps the teachers tried to present a modified perspective about the parents because they thought they should. It was my perception, however, that most teachers really did resist painting the parents as all the same. Most had examples of parents who were very involved and supportive of them. One did get the sense, however, that these kinds of experiences with parents were the exception rather than the rule.

Alternative perspectives about parental involvement

It is important to note that some teachers do not expect this kind of contact and instead acknowledge the constellation of factors which may result in a different kind of participation with the school. I turn now to two examples of teachers who had a different response to the parental involvement situation at Clark Elementary.

Several teachers, during our interviews or in other more informal conversations, told me that they understood the children and their experiences in a very personal way because they had come from similar circumstances themselves. One young teacher – both in age and experience – recounted her experience of growing up in a rough neighborhood and having to ride the city bus by herself to school. She was a “latch-key” child – waiting a short time for her mom to come home after work. Later, her mother was able to stay home with her and her siblings:

I was blessed to have a parent at home all the time in that type of environment, you had a parent there that was always like “stop- oh no, you’re not going to do that.” My mom and dad were continuously moving up until we were better. Like we moved from the dumps to a better dump, to a better dump to middle class, you know. And they worked at it. And I saw – I see my parents grow as parents and stuff, and you see a lot of these parents trying to do this here, too. So that’s good. You have a good amount that’s trying to help their kids.

(Ms. Simpson)

In this excerpt, Ms. Simpson tells me that she has experienced some of the things her students also experience. She makes an important observation – that the presence of her mother at home was important in keeping her on the right track. Embedded in this example are also references to residential mobility as her family slowly bettered their financial and residential positions. For her, the moves marked better situations and opportunities. She concludes by drawing parallels between her parents working to make a better life for their children, and some parents at Clark Elementary doing the same.

She describes the parental involvement as being “pretty good” with most of her parents, but mentions there are a few she has never met. Like some other teachers, she predicts the parents will come to the school if they find out their child is going to be retained and have to repeat a grade. Ms. Simpson is one of the few teachers I interviewed who questioned the school’s approach to parental involvement. For her, the most important kind of involvement is for the parents to “consistently check on their children’s progress. Because to me, that’s the most parental involvement that you need in all due honesty.” But this does not mean they need to come to the school, instead, a phone call or even notes passed back and forth with the

parent fulfills this need. She has observed that sometimes when parents are at the school “in the kid’s face” the students are nervous and don’t perform well. She continues with an assessment of the school’s approach:

Um, I think that it’s a little unrealistic in this environment to build bigger parental involvement, just because so many of the parents are struggling to make ends meet. It’s possible – don’t ever get me wrong because anything is possible, you know – but uh, they just have to be more realistic with the things – like parents – my parents are not going to be able to make it to an [evening event at the school] – and that’s a very good idea, but a lot of kids want to come but their parents ain’t going to – maybe they work at night, so if they start working at six o’clock they can’t come and do that...I don’t know how to increase the parent involvement school-wide. I mean, it’s just the little things. Little things count ten times more than all these big lovely luxury stuff that we want the school district to see that we’re doing, and how cute it is. I thought it was a really good idea when they had the thing when the parents came and talked to the administrators, and they had donuts and stuff out here, but the time period was wrong...It was like 7:30 in the morning. I mean, let’s be real. We should have [those] sessions during the day so the parent can pick a time and come, you know what I mean? If they want to talk with an administrator, they’ll have more options – they didn’t give them enough options. If this time doesn’t work out, “sorry, we tried.” (Ms. Simpson)

Ms. Simpson does not white-wash the parental involvement situation at Clark Elementary. She has not met several of her students’ parents and says that it should not only fall on her to communicate with the parents – the parents should make an effort to check on their children’s academic progress. Unlike many other teachers who chalk up a lack of participation at the school as a lack of caring by parents, Ms. Simpson implicates the school’s scheduling of events at times not ideal for the parents. She also hints at an idea that some of the parental involvement programs are

implemented with an eye toward recognition from the school district, something another teacher more derisively described as “dog and pony shows”.

Ms. Simpson describes the relationships she has with parents as “friendships”. She attributes this in part to a similarity of age, but also to a personal understanding of their life circumstances. She points out that many of the parents are young and so is she: “So it’s just like having one of your home-girls, or one of your home-boys, you know what I mean?” She also remembers her own experience of “moving from the dumps to a better dump” and views the parents as doing the best they can. She presents herself as a very outgoing and fun person, which no doubt helps her rapport with some parents. Several time I saw her chatting with parents who had come to school for various reasons. These interactions did not appear to be formal school-parent discussions, but much more informal and relaxed.

Another teacher, Ms. Grayson, examines her part of establishing parental participation. Ms. Grayson has been teaching two years after working in the business world. She is warm and personable, but also quiet – she often eats lunch at her desk to have a precious few minutes of “down time” during the day. She tells me that she had better parental involvement her second year of teaching and confides that her first year she “dreaded” interacting with the parents:

I just didn’t feel – I think I was just not fully confident in myself, I mean, I felt okay, I knew I was qualified to be a teacher, and I knew that I had a class and that was okay, but when it came to parents, that just wasn’t something that I had put all of my focus in. I was really focusing on doing my class, and for that to come in, that was just like “oh God”. But this year, I’m a lot more confident in building that bridge, because I know that I need that support....And I accepted the

fact that I need that support, and by needing that it allows them [the parents] to feel free to talk to me and feel confident with me and come up to the school and do whatever I needed them to do. (Ms. Grayson)

Ms. Grayson, who said she has “pretty good involvement”, attributes part of that to her acceptance of the need for parental support. In contrast to her first year of teaching when she dreaded this aspect of teaching, she became a teacher whose class won twice for “most parents attending a school event” during her second year. She lists the ways parents of her students show their support and participation: coming to have lunch with their child, a parent who sometimes brings her lunch, another parent who donated a large bag of playground balls, and notes exchanged and phone calls about student progress.

Although Ms. Grayson is not sure if every year will be as good as this one, she plans to continue her new approach:

I only have this year and last year to compare and contrast, and I don't know if last year was more me than it was my parents, you know, I was the one who was holding back, and I recognize that now, that I was holding back. But because I was reaching out more this year, and then I have a group of parents that I think, in my opinion, are accepting my reaching out – my communication with them. I don't know that it is going to be like that every year, but I do know with me seeing my results this year, I do aim to do that – to reach out to them. So at least I can do my part in reaching out to them every year, because I had no idea that I was going to get the kind of reception that I was going to get. (Ms. Grayson)

Ms. Grayson was surprised by the positive response of parents – which is understandable based on her own first year of teaching experience but also the stories that are told in the halls and the teacher's lounge as well as the subtle and overt messages about the lack of parental involvement at Clark Elementary. The kinds of

parental involvement she describes – coming to school for a lunch with a child, donating materials for the class, frequent communication with several of the parents – is on its face rather ordinary. Yet in this particular school context, this kind of parent participation stands out as an exception. She observes that it was her stance of “holding back” which was influencing the lack of parental involvement, rather than placing blame on the parents.

Administrators at Clark note that they would like increased parental involvement and focus their energies on specific programs to “meet the needs” of the parents so that they can be more active educational partners. Both Ms. Simpson’s and Ms. Grayson’s accounts take a different perspective. Ms. Simpson questions the value of the programs compared with the “little things” which seem to place individual teacher-parent relationships at the center. She also questions some of the activities that are held up as important kinds of parental involvement, such as coming to the school building. Ms. Grayson focuses on her own participation in the creation of parental participation in the educational endeavor.

Family language: a common practice, multiple meanings

The stated need for especially caring teachers is directly linked to the condition of the students and their families. Teachers’ ideas about caring for the students are intimately linked with their perceptions of the parents and the apparent lacks which the teachers perceive as needing to fill. Every teacher I talked with expressed in one way or another that the classroom environment is not simply an

additive mass of individual students each working on their own, but a community - a sense of being connected, in varied senses. School is more than learning academic subjects; various social values and skills are integral in the grade school arena. The classroom is the main vehicle for fostering teacher-student relationships as well as relationships with peers in which these values and skills are both communicated and practiced.

Creating a classroom environment happens in as many different ways as there are teachers. However, one theme emerged in several of the classrooms I visited and in many interviews in terms of the metaphors teachers used to shape the connections within their classes. If you had spent time on the Clark campus and stayed for any length of time (during the study period), you would have heard multiple references to “the Clark family.” Although not unusual in many respects, in that many groups refer to themselves loosely as “family”, this language takes on multiple meanings and layers at Clark. The use of family language helped create an environment for caring between teachers and students. The use of family language communicated several things, including clear lines of authority, laid the foundation for connection between teachers and students, and served as a framework to encourage a sense of responsibility for one another within the classroom and school.

Part of the appeal of the family imagery is the immediate and familiar connection to authority for those in the “mother” and “father” roles. The students are the “kids” and the teacher is the parent figure. Beyond notions of caring, the role conveys power and authority. As one female second grade teacher said:

The thing I do with my kids – I tell them that we were a family – I’m the momma and they’re the kids. What I say goes [laughs]. No discussion, no ifs, ands or buts about it. And they’re like brothers and sisters, and uh, you protect each other – you don’t fight with each other. You speak to each other in an appropriate manner, you know, you don’t disrespect each other, because words can hurt ten times more than physical hits, and our whole pod – we’re a community. So this is your community. Over here – the second grade – that’s your neighborhood – and a neighborhood is a whole bunch of communities together, you know? So that’s how we teach them – individually we’re a family, but we’re you know, a community – and the second grade – we’re our own neighborhood.

(Mrs. Paulson)

The open concept layout of the classrooms supported this neighborhood feel since each classroom could see and hear several other classrooms.

Teachers also used family language to create a sense of connectedness in the classroom. Some teachers talked about how they tried to make their classrooms like family, some even using the language of “momma, sister and brother” within the class. A new teacher (in her second year) talks about how she wants the boys and girls to care for each other – “they are almost like little couples.” The family idea is something that the children can relate to, and the teacher can appeal to that idea. There is lot of talk at the school about how “we’re all in this together.”

This approach is not without costs. In one classroom observation, Mrs. Myers tells the class that they would be looking at the vocabulary from the reading, and that they would be adding to their word rings.

She wrote each word on the overhead, having them repeat letter by letter as she was writing. At one point, someone was spelling ahead of her...and she asked who it was. It was a boy, Shawn. She told him that he would have to spell the next word all by himself. The next

word was “ignore” and he spelled it i-n-n-o-r-e. She told him that was wrong, and said, “I am the leader of this classroom.” A minute or two later she softened it a bit by saying that “some of you may know how to spell some of the words, and that is fine, but we are a family in this class, and it’s just like if you were walking somewhere with your family – you would all stay together. (Field Note 9/4/2001)

I can understand how Mrs. Myers wants to maintain her control of the classroom. In this instance we also see, however, the tension between the individual student who is ahead of his classmates, yet reprimanded instead of encouraged or complemented for knowing how to spell the previous words. The student is asked to “slow down” so the rest of the class, which is likened to his family, can catch up with him.

The family theme is also used in some classrooms, especially in the older grades, to help students form a sense of responsibility to help class members. When the teacher refers to the students as brothers and sisters, she can then use that relationship as a rationale for why they should help one another. The fourth-grade team leader describes what she does when she has a new student arrive and how the classmates should help explain how the classroom works.

When my new students come in I introduce them to the class and I tell my students who are already here, “well, we have a new brother or we have a new sister coming in” and I tell the class their name, and then I have each one of my students stand and introduce themselves. Then I would get another student to show them where to put their backpack – just show them different things like how I like work done, show them how to check out a library book, or show them how to work on the computer, stuff like that. Instead of doing it all myself...I let the students also take part in helping that student get acclimated to the new classroom. I go back over rules, I tell them how we take care of each other....It’s like they’re my own, you know, and I treat them that way. And make sure that they look at each other as sisters and brothers – taking care of each other. You think of this person as your own sister, your own brother – you help each other, you don’t laugh at each other

– you laugh with each other. If someone makes a mistake, you don't make fun of them, you know, you help each other out.

(Mrs. Arnette)

In many of these examples we see that one sense of family draws on a more inclusive notion of family used within the African American culture. This use is similar to the description by Collins of “othermothers”, or through Stack’s (1974) understanding of “fictive kin”. Examples of this type of usage of kin terms in the school setting can be found in Foster’s work (1997) and also in research about segregated school and the community or sense of family that formed that went beyond the nuclear family to include other adults who assisted with child-rearing. The idea is that the children are viewed not solely as the responsibility of two biological parents, but are the responsibility of the community (Siddle Walker, 1996; Morris & Morris, 2000).

Yet there is also a belief shared by some teachers that “family” is not happening at home, as seen in comments about how, in their opinion, the only parenting some students receive is at school:

[Y]ou have to care about the students like they were your own child. Would you want your own child to learn? Would you want your own child to succeed? And so, I think that's how you really have to - really have to look at these students... You must care about them, you know, and make sure that they're eating every day - you know, so in a sense, these are your children, even though you only have them for a certain amount of time, you have to care about them like you would your own children, even though I don't have any children - biologically, but guess what? [laughs]... I know that in some ways, I mean, I see it now that I'm impacting the lives of these children, you know, and I'm giving them what they need, so I feel like - especially with trifling parents - not all of them - I feel like the students need someone that's gonna be there - you know? And going to be supportive of what they

do - and they're gonna have some consistency... And they haven't had to worry about me leaving or me being absent, because I haven't been absent. And they know I'm not going anywhere, and maybe that's what they need - because a lot of times their parents go out of town and they are gone for weeks and weeks - and dad leaves, or their mom leaves - things like that - but I'm their consistency. And I feel like that's important.

(Ms. Gilbert)

In addition to this teacher who sees herself as the “consistency” for her students, many other teachers also spoke about how they taught students things they were not receiving at home. We now turn to some of those examples.

Teacher ideas about caring

Many of the ways teachers understood caring were similar to other examples in previous literature. For example, teachers at Clark gave examples of caring for students such as seeing students as individuals (Thayer-Bacon and Bacon, 1996; Sickle and Spector, 1996; Alder and Moulton, 1998; Ferreira and Bosworth, 2001; Bosworth, 1995), seeing the best in the students (Noddings, 1993), and providing consistent discipline and routine (Baumrind, 1991; Wentzel, 1997; Alder and Moulton, 1998). Others noted that simply accepting the challenge of working with the type of students at Clark was a caring act:

The children that we have are very sweet children, but they are very needy, and you know, they are lovable, and they have attitudes. You have to be prepared, and you have to realize that what they bring to school is their best self, and then you have to work from there. Even though they are not at the point where you want them to be, or where they need to be, you just have to work with them from where they are, and take them to wherever they need to go, because that's the only choice that you have.

(Ms. Barnes)

The needs of the students were mentioned often as something which made working at Clark draining at times. These included both emotional and material needs. Teachers gave numerous examples of the need to be involved both emotionally and tangibly, through the provision of material goods. One teacher bought birthday gifts for each of her students, because she was not sure they would receive a gift at home. Others talked about giving student lunch money if the students forgot or did not have it that day, otherwise, Ms. Pierce said, “they get this big ugly peanut butter sandwich in the cafeteria”. This material provision is connected with the idea that “you have to care about the students like they were your own child” (Ms. Gilpin). Ms. Simpson expresses the same idea, “just the way that you would take care of your own child, whatever you have you give them”.

Regardless of the particular family background, it was up to the teachers “to do all they could”. Many teachers worked very hard to “take them where they need to go”, often spending extra time beyond the regular school day. For example, the entire fourth grade teaching team volunteered every Saturday morning for two months to help their students who needed extra preparation for the statewide achievement exam. Other teachers gave up their lunch hour or stayed after school to tutor individual students without pay. Many gave out their home phone numbers to their students (and their families) so they could call them if they needed help.

Teachers also expressed ideas about the way they cared which corresponded with other accounts of African American teachers which discuss the importance of “guidance” in their approach to interacting with students (Foster, 1997; Ladson-

Billings, 1994). This approach is reported as being important in the experiences of students of color, more so than for white students (Bosworth, 1995; Ferreira and Bosworth, 2001) Part of working with the students at Clark meant giving lots of hugs²⁷, and also “fussing” at the students to hold them to high expectations. The atmosphere at Clark on the whole seemed welcoming, inviting and warm (and sometimes loud, too, if a class or student were being “fussed at”). As one well-feared but also well-loved teacher described, “it’s a fuss, but it’s a loving fuss”. This guidance could be seen as African American teachers being firm, and sometimes involved yelling, punishments such as missing recess or a school special event, and even physical consequences. For example, one teacher would sometimes swat students who were not doing their work (perhaps playfully, but certainly not acceptable under school district policies). Another teacher, who had been in the armed services, regularly made her class hold a modified squat so they could “get back on track” with the academic program.

An eighth-grade male in a study by Bosworth (1995:691) explained, “Sometimes they can be a little rough or angry with us when trying to look out for our well-being”. This directly relates to being a “warm demander” – which acknowledges an aspect of care as not only being nice, but having high expectations and correcting students when they are not measuring up to those standards (Vasquez, 1988; Irvine

²⁷ The hugs were freely given by many of the women teachers. Every male teacher and staff member expressed hesitance about physical contact with the students beyond a handshake or other kinds of touch deemed innocuous, such as a pat on the head, due to fears about being accused of pedophilia.

and Fraser, 1998). The “warm demanding” implies the presence of an emotional climate which is safe for the student which forms the context of the demand to meet high expectations from the teacher (Kleinfeld, 1975). Compare with a fourth grade student at Clark who wrote the following which ties in with the importance of guidance:

To me, the word leader means a person that a child can look up to. A person that you want to be like when you grow up. It is a person that you admire very much. The special leader in my life is my teacher, Mrs. Bradley. *She is a special leader in my life because she tells me when I do not do a good job on my work. She tells me when I need to check my attitude.* She tells me that she loves me. She tells me that I need to take pride in my work. She tells me that I am wonderfully made but all of my abilities must be developed. She tells me that I am a very smart young lady. Mrs. Bradley is a special person in my life that I will respect until I die. (emphasis added)

Some teachers at Clark thought that the students needed this balance – of warmth but also a measure of strictness to get the message across using both means. Although they were aware that many students faced multiple challenges, they could not let the students use this as an excuse not to succeed:

Um...you have to care, you have to take a few minutes to listen to them sometimes, as far as things not related to school – things they want to talk about – express. You know, they might say “can I talk to you for a minute.” And it’s like, okay. You have to input that in the day – you have to listen and care and let them know that you really do care, and show that day to day. Um...so it’s important, but once again, it boils down to you still have to do this – you still have to learn this – you still need to do this, you still need to get better grades, you still have to pass the TAAS test in order to go into the fifth grade.
(Ms. Foster)

Sometimes the “guidance” needed to come in the form of a “fuss” in order to be most convincing.

A third theme emerged which specifically related to teachers instilling certain kinds of values and behaviors – those that could be considered “middle-class.” This was explicit on the part of many school personnel. The administrators and many of the teaching staff had received training from an educator who had spent 25 years working with children and families who lived in poverty. One part of her research that the teachers cited were the “The Hidden Rules of Poverty” which explained that different social classes had different rules. By learning the “rules” of poverty, teachers could more fully understand the behavior of their students, as well as work to teach other rules with which students were less familiar. Below is an excerpt that sums up her philosophy:

Yet the role of the educator or social worker or employer is not to save the individual, but rather to offer a support system, role models, and opportunities to learn, which will increase the likelihood of the person’s success. Ultimately, the choice always belongs to the individual.

Yet another notion among the middle class and educated is that if the poor had a choice, they would live differently. The financial resources would certainly help make a difference. Even with the financial resources, however, not every individual who received those finances would choose to live differently. There is a freedom of verbal expression, an appreciation of individual personality, a heightened and intense emotional experience, and a sensual, kinesthetic approach to life usually not found in the middle class or among the educated. These characteristics are so intertwined in the daily life of the poor that to have those cut off would be to lose a limb. Many choose not to live a different life. And for some, alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual.

But it is the responsibility of educators and others who work with the poor to teach the differences and skills/rules that will allow the individual to make the choice. As it now stands for many of the poor, the choice never exists.

(Payne, 1998: 148)

While Payne does uncritically embrace a culture of poverty perspective, she writes that students need “to be taught the hidden rules of middle class – not in denigration of their own but rather an another set of rules that can be used if they so choose” (Payne, 1998: 61). She also notes that assumptions about intelligence may in fact be more related to understanding the rules of various classes. The staff members at Clark who had read Payne’s work thought it was very useful in helping them understand their students. I had been exposed to some of Payne’s work earlier (in a community meeting which I discussed in Chapter 2), and commented that her work was controversial. Each person I spoke with at Clark about the book said they did not think it was controversial at all, but contained a lot of truth. Payne’s assertion that poor children come from a “sensual, kinesthetic” approach to life directly relates to the principal’s insistence on providing kinesthetic learning activities for the students. In addition, she believes that it is the responsibility of the teachers and other school staff to teach the “hidden rules” of the middle class to the students (and their families). In other words, teachers who had access to certain kinds of cultural capital, responded to students by trying to impart these skills which the students’ parents either did not have, or which they saw no evidence of in the students.

The majority of students at Clark were in need of learning these skills. Mr. Hill, a third grade teacher, pointed out a group of students who were the exception at Clark. He notes that these students do exhibit a certain kind of behavior and appearance not present in the majority of Clark’s student’ body:

Walk around – if you walk around and you can spot about ten of them at any given time. Ten little girls that don't belong at this school. I mean, their hair is done – every day – not in the trendy styles, but the true little girl styles. It's well kept, real pretty girls that dress nicely every day. They don't have flashy things, but they have nice things. And they're clean. Their teeth are together, you know. They are worried about their physical appearances. They don't belong here. And when you see their parents pick them up – you know they don't [belong here] because their mother is a nurse, or they come in very professional dress, or that's their only child – things like that. So you know they don't belong here.

(Mr. Hill)

These students' mothers have good jobs and dress professionally, and the girls are clean, dress nicely and have nice things, in contrast to the majority of Clark students. Mr. Hill notes that several of these students once lived in Clark's attendance zone, but their parents have "moved up and out". They choose to bring their children to Clark because they like the mostly African American atmosphere.²⁸ His statement, by highlighting the exception, sheds light on his opinions about the rest of the Clark student body who do not share in this more privileged class status.

Because the majority of Clark's student body were perceived not to be from this elevated class background, they were seen as requiring an infusion of cultural capital. Physical manifestations, such as the condition of students' clothes, hair and hygiene served as visible symbols for lacks at home. There were three main ways teachers and administrators instructed and attempted to instill a different set of values and behaviors in the students. These included teachers and other community leaders

²⁸ While this is technically not permitted according to district policy, Clark adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" approach, especially if a good student who was not a trouble-maker wanted to continue to attend, as long as their parent or guardian could get them to school and pick them up on time.

serving as role models of working professionals, the use of Standard English, and instruction in manners and how to be a “lady” or a “gentleman”. Each served as a way to correct “poor” behavior.

Middle-class role models

There is lots of talk about role models at Clark Elementary. One way that teachers can be role models is to provide the image of a successful professional.

That’s another positive that [the principal] tries to stress how important that is, and to have a certain – you know, she wants the teachers to dress in a certain way – I don’t do it – I wear shoes and socks and stuff, but she wants them to be very professional – to reinforce so that image is there somewhere in their lives.

(Ms. Smyth, white fine arts teacher)

This example is reminiscent of Wilson’s discussion of the lack of role models in many inner city areas (Wilson, 1996). By requesting that teachers wear certain kinds of clothing, the principal wants to show the students an example of what one wears for “professional” work, something that she notes is lacking for many of the students in their neighborhoods.

“Leaders and Heroes” is another theme incorporated during a portion of the school year. One component is a speaker series that provides a variety of role models, each communicating the message that the students can achieve, and that school is important. Participants have included educators, an Olympic athlete, and political figures – including the mayor of the metropolitan area. The principal thinks it is important for the students to see examples of other African-Americans and

Latinos who are leaders and heroes, and who may have come from similar backgrounds as the students.

Standard English vs. Black English Vernacular

Another facet related to professional role models related to the use of Black English Vernacular (BEV). The use of Black English Vernacular was a topic of debate at Clark Elementary. The principal and several of the most experienced teachers at the school were adamantly opposed to its use at any time within the school context. On several occasions I heard the principal and more experienced teachers remind other teachers that “We use Standard English at school”. The principal’s point was that students needed to learn to speak standard English correctly so they could succeed in the larger white society.

Many of the teachers, however, incorporated Black English Vernacular into some of their lessons, and sometimes used it while talking with parents if they thought it would make the parents feel more at ease with them. Their contention was that the use of BEV could help students connect with the educational experience, and if that helped students engage, they thought its use was justified. These same teachers also said that if teachers started talking to them in BEV they would switch and also use that speech, with the hope of reducing the barriers between themselves and the parents. The tension between the two camps was about whether you affirm the home culture through the incorporation of BEV, or reject the home culture through an emphasis on standard English. I did not see evidence of a middle ground in which

students were taught about code-switching which is the method in which students learn about both, and that both languages have their place (Delpit; 1995).

Teaching manners

The following interview excerpt explains that the need for teaching manners and etiquette is connected in part to the same circumstance which results in heavy responsibilities that some students encounter in their homes:

The children have - especially here - have special needs. You know, they're not getting it at home, so it you think you're gonna come in and just teach straight from the book and curriculum and go with guidelines from the state – you have to teach everything. So life skills, proper etiquette, how to walk, how to talk, how to dress, how to put their clothes on, how to – what do you expect, what's not the norm, how children have to think on this level, and then also how to bring children back from being adults, uh, an adult state back to being in a child state, because a lot of children here – they're small adults – they wash, they bathe their little brothers and sisters, they tell their little brothers and sisters. They'll get home and the parents may be gone all day long at work, you know, so they have to do all these responsibilities that adults do. So most children here have a unique way of doing things. So that's the hardest thing for children – they are already in an adult state – they come back to school – and its coming back to a child state. (Mr. Simpkins)

Several teachers besides Mr. Simpkins spoke of the children being “grown”. This was not a compliment about their maturity, but a comment about how they were thrust into adult responsibilities due to the situation at home. Many children were responsible for taking care of their younger siblings, some until late in the evening. For the teachers, this posed a conflict when the child, who was used to being the “boss” at home with younger siblings, does not want to accept the authority of the

teacher, and exhibits a “bad attitude”. Helping the children “come back to a child state” was a necessity for a smooth chain of command within in the classroom. Although the students may have had “adult responsibilities”, that did not ensure they knew how to fulfill those roles, or how to behave properly. As Mr. Simpkins says, the teachers “have to teach everything”. Here we see students taking on adult responsibilities due to the inability of parents to fulfill those roles (for whatever reasons), and also children who are not learning what they should be learning from the parents. One way teachers talked about caring for their students was by helping them realize their role as children – in contrast with the adult responsibilities that many have at home.

The most overt channels for transmitting the learning of certain middle-class behaviors were the “etiquette club” and a club for girls which was formed later. The primary objective of the etiquette club was to teach interested students how they would eat at a restaurant. The teacher in charge of the club explained that many of the students had never seen a teacup and saucer before. To remedy this, she had a large table set with formal place-settings so they could practice. She said “even if we are having pizza in the cafeteria that day, we will eat it on our plates, with our forks and knives.” They also used the opportunity to practice polite dinner conversation while they ate.

Many of the female teachers and staff created a club for girls only. The all-girls group was modeled in part to be like a sorority, and girls applied to join. One of the teachers who helped found the club describes it:

It's like a club. We get volunteers from the community, and we do stuff with them, like we'll go on camping trips together, we monitor their behavior, we monitor their grades, we do private tutoring with them, you know, to keep them on track. Teach them about feminine hygiene, and stuff like that. And really give them – you know, talk about sex, get them all ready for when they get ready to get out of here. That they know what's expected of them, how to conduct themselves as a lady.

(Mrs. Robinson)

The girls were expected to serve as examples for the whole school, in terms of their academic effort, but also in the ways they treated each other and the ways they behaved. In one meeting I attended, the girls, who were from many different classrooms, were interviewing each other and introducing their partner to the group. The teacher facilitating the meeting told them how to speak slowly, clearly and loud enough for the whole room to hear. She also emphasized making eye contact and projecting a self-confident attitude. When the girls sat back down on the stairs in the room, this provided the opportunity for a brief tangent about how to sit in a skirt, and how “young ladies” behaved – instruction deemed necessary because the girls had evidently not assimilated this information from the home environment.

In addition to this club, the teachers of the all-girl classes have dress-up days, and they use those days to teach the students how “to act like ladies.” This includes having good posture, being polite and respectful toward teachers and one's peers, and walking with hands clasped in a certain way as they walk in the school hallways. The all-male classes, who wear camouflage fatigues on certain days of the week, learn about manners and discipline, too. The emphasis on proper manners, acting like “ladies and gentlemen” and instruction about hygiene are viewed as caring because

the students are “not getting it at home”. These intentional programs are designed to teach aspects of cultural capital which is presumed missing from the home environment.

Discussion

Many researchers make the case that cultural relevance is important in the educational setting (See for example Ladson-Billings, 2001, 1994; Hale, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Many schools do not have a staff which reflects the cultural diversity of its students. I had the opportunity to conduct research in a school which purposefully hired an African American staff to match the 85% African American student body. This was viewed as an important way to respond to the Clark student body. Hiring African American teachers was a strategy with the goal of helping bridge cultural differences between school staff and students and their families. According to the cultural difference theory, this approach of matching teacher and student backgrounds helps reduce misunderstandings between teachers and students, and may produce a greater attachment to the educational process for students.

I observed many examples of incorporating African American culture into the school experience, not only through learning focused on certain individuals and topics, but also with an emphasis on multiple intelligence and the kinesthetic learning style. Many teachers used “call and response” pedagogical styles at various points, as well as using Black English Vernacular at times. Other kinds of response included addressing certain needs so that learning or responsivity on the child’s part can occur.

This relates to making sure the child has eaten breakfast, or buying a child lunch, and also relates to the emotional realm – finding out why a child is upset. These physical and emotional needs are directly related to the child’s home environment.

Yet, simply hiring African American teachers was not a silver bullet which resulted in ideal family-school relationships. Like many schools with low-SES populations, the teachers and administrators experienced difficulty in achieving the kind of parental involvement they would have liked. In this case study, with a primarily African American school staff, we see some ways that social class (and how that influences teachers’ perceptions of parents) shapes the ways teachers talk about “caring” for their students.

Metz (1990) examines what shapes teachers’ practices, perspectives, goals and experiences at the high school level. Part of what shapes these experiences, she argues, relates to social class. Part of the teacher-parent conflict may stem in part from social class differences. Lareau (2000) has noted that social class shapes parental contact with the educational system. For example, she finds that working-class parents did not try to intervene or supervise very much. Instead, they trusted the school to educate their children. In addition, they viewed education as something that happens primarily at school, and not as much at home. In contrast, upper-middle class parents had much more connection with the school. They also had more at-home academic preparation for their children, and intervened with their children’s teachers much more often. This was possible for the upper-middle class parents because they had more detailed information about what schools wanted of them, and

they also “adopted a view of their proper role in their children’s schooling which more closely matched teachers’ wishes than did working-class parents” (Lareau, 2000: 170). In addition, the upper-middle class parents were more likely to feel competent due to having attended college. These parents were more likely to feel that teachers were their peers, or even that they were more educated than the teachers.

Many teachers at Clark were aware of this, and spoke about the low education of many parents as being a barrier to relationships between families and the school. The parents may be intimidated by the college-educated professionals at school. Another possibility is that the parents had negative experiences in school which have colored their interaction with the school. We see that many of the teachers at Clark expect (and hope for) the kind of contact more likely from middle-class parents. This includes visits at the school and frequent contact with the teacher. These kinds of school involvement, however, may clash with the economic reality of many of the families. For example, African American mothers working outside the home, and the participation of older children helping with younger sibling have always been necessities for large proportions of the population, since slavery and continuing today. It was interesting that some of the African American teachers viewed this more as a lack in the families, rather than as a consequence of the economic realities of many single-headed households.

At Clark we see a social class difference between the parents and the teachers which at times causes friction, and at other times is successfully bridged. Teachers must have a Bachelor’s degree and have entered a professional position – even if they

came from a background similar to the parents, it is reasonable to argue that they have membership in a social class different from the majority of parents at Clark Elementary. Across the continuum, teachers' relationships at Clark are shaped in part through their experiences of parental involvement. The teacher's attitude about the parents in turn relates to the kinds of ways that they think they need to care about their students. These differences in social class (and perceptions of differences) color the kinds of things teachers do to be "caring" for their students.

At Clark, there is a tension between two ways of viewing African American families. On the one hand, many teachers frequently use kin imagery, which taps into extended family forms and is similar to historical research which shows this strong connection between teachers and students and community during segregation. (Siddle Walker, 1993; Morris & Morris, 2000). Jones (1981) refers to the school as "one's home away from home, where students were taught, nurtured, supported, corrected, encouraged, and punished" (p. 2 cited in Siddle Walker, 1993). In addition, Foster's (1997) research about Black teachers contains many references to the use of kin imagery, among teachers during segregation as well as after desegregation. One teacher who particularly embodies this idea is Ms. Barnes, a fourth grade teacher who makes home visits before the school year to every student's family. These were not home visits done in a spirit of monitoring or judging the home, as much as providing a way to meet the parents on their "home turf". The teacher in part adopted this strategy so that the family would feel more comfortable having their first contact with someone from the school at their home, instead of in the school building. In this

case, it seems likely that it helped that the teacher was an African American woman, who herself was a single parent, something she had in common with many of the families.²⁹

In contrast, however, are the ways that some teachers hold a deficiency idea of the students' families, as exemplified by teacher statements that – “this is the only parenting they're getting”. Mrs. Gilbert's perception that the parents didn't care about their children and how she in return does not care about the parents provides another example. As we saw previously, this teacher, who described a combative relationship with some of the parents of her students, explained that she, as their teacher “provided what they [the students] need.” She views herself as providing a measure of “consistency” that the “trifling parents” are not providing for their children at home. One response, then, is to create an alternate family at school – a family that makes up for the perceived lacks in students' homes. Use of kin imagery can both connect with the families and African American culture, and also serve as a basis for authority to make changes in students' upbringings.

For Noddings “inclusion” means being able to see with “two pairs of eyes” – yours as well as the “cared-for”. At Clark, there is a variation in the amount of this “inclusion” that happen with parents. Some teachers seem able to see with “two pairs

²⁹ Ms. Barnes' experiences contrast with the accounts of the white female social worker at Clark who also made home visits to students' families. Often, no one came to the door and she thought that they suspected she was coming to “check up on them”. This is not to say that all African American teachers automatically have good rapport, and that good relationships cannot be forged between white staff members and African American or Latino families. But it also seems disingenuous to ignore and pretend that race does not matter.

of eyes” more than other teachers. The school tries to “care for” parents – but is it interpreted this way by the “cared-for”? Interviewing parents was outside the scope of this project, however, if people vote with their feet, we can see that many of the programs designed to “help” or “educate” the parents were not well attended by the African-American parents. One teacher provided insight into this situation, when she said that all the programs were nice, but suggested that the school had one eye focused on looking good for the district, when really it was the “little things” that mattered more in terms of establishing relationships with the parents.

Some of Noddings conceptualizations help us understand the success of teachers who assessed themselves as having positive relationships with parents. For example, the teachers who thought they had good parental involvement shared an approach of “meeting parents where they are”. Noddings would say that they were not making the parents into objects, and instead participated in the existence of complete caring relationships. The teachers at Clark for the most part are in a different social class than the majority of families (more than 75% qualify for free and reduced breakfast and lunch at the school). Teachers’ own families and backgrounds also shaped their understandings of parents. It is not correct, however, to assume that it was only teachers who experienced similar circumstances as the families who were the best “bridge builders”. While this did seem to help certain individual teachers make connections at times, some of the teachers with the strongest parental involvement came from middle-class family backgrounds. It is not a simple one-to-one correlation. Teachers of different class backgrounds were able to forge

positive relationships with parents. The important point seemed to be in acknowledging the constraints facing the students' families and relating this to how it might shape their ability to be involved at the school. Examples include when teachers acknowledge that some parents may be "tired from working" versus an attribution that "they don't care" in explaining why some parents do not come to the school to check on their child's educational progress. Mistaking an absence of a certain type of contact with the school for a lack of caring on the part of the parent did not help forge connections with parents.³⁰

However, differences in social class in part influence how some teachers perceive what it means "to care". Some try to transform "poor" behavior on the part of both parents and children as the first step with the belief that parents need to be educated, or act in certain ways in order to be effective educational partners. Other teachers start by accepting the parents "where they are"; they assign the best possible motives to parents in an act of what Noddings calls confirmation. Teachers also instruct about more than academic subjects; in this case, teachers at Clark taught things such as how to behave like a lady or gentleman, other lessons about etiquette, and other tools of the middle-class. Part of their task as they see it is to transmit cultural capital for the future success of their students as they continue their education

³⁰ While it is true that some parents are neglectful and abusive, it is much more common that parents are interested in the education of their children, although this is expressed in different ways. Research about parental involvement of low-income parents makes this point (See for example Chavkin and Williams, 1989; Rosier and Corsaro, 1993; Leitch and Tangri, 1988).

and hopefully attain a greater level of education and occupational success than their parents did.

The issue seems to be that we need teachers to teach and interact in a way that works with different social classes of families. Simply hiring African American teachers to match the majority of students and families did not result in an automatic rapport; indeed, sometimes the result was hostility. Ladson-Billings (2001) suggests in *Crossing Over to Canaan* that all teachers can learn to reach students in a culturally relevant manner; in the same way, this research highlights the need to address social class and how those differences can also be bridged.

CHAPTER SIX

Family at School: Otherfathers Wanted

A particular concern about African American boys and their educational experiences is a common theme in schools as well as the halls of the academy, and a main concern at Clark Elementary. Finding male role models for the boys is an often suggested partial remedy. Usually, these role models come from the community, rather than from within the school because of the relative lack of male teachers. Those men who do teach are more likely to work in middle and high school; some fear that this may be too late for helping African American boys stay on a path geared toward academic success and that a crucial point of intervention is needed much earlier. However, fewer men teach in elementary schools, in part, the argument goes, because elementary school (at least at this point in history) is a woman-dominated institution and the participation of men, therefore, makes them “suspect.” Yet, at the same time, African American men are highly desired to be role models for African American boys. At Clark, African American men were intentionally recruited to serve as teachers and role models.

Many of the calls for more men in the classroom take a rather simplistic view by assuming that injecting men into the teaching environment will automatically result in a “solution” (Waldron, 1995; Holland, 1987; Cunningham & Watson, 2002). For example, in an article about recruiting male teachers in *Young Children*, several questions are posed: “Are we providing positive role models for girls and boys? Are

we responding to the concerns of fathers and mothers in the families we serve? Are we the inclusive, diverse profession that we claim to be? The answers to these questions would be positive more often is more men worked in early childhood programs” (Cunningham & Watson, 2002). It is important to explore how men see their participation in the educational setting, and not merely rely on assumptions that the addition of more men will produce a certain “result”.

This chapter examines the specific role of African American men elementary school teachers and how they view their participation in responding to the needs of students and their families, particularly the lack of African American men role models. This chapter considers how the school context shapes the participation of African American men teachers. I first consider how the women teachers “let the men be men”. Next I explore how the men view their involvement as elementary school teachers and role models, including the use of family language. I conclude this chapter with the school’s desire to influence all boys through the “men and boys only” group that operated at Clark.

African American men at Clark Elementary

The principal’s teacher employment strategy of sex-based targeted recruitment is important because it sets the tone at the school as a welcoming place for men, and particularly African American men. This is especially true in recent years as there have been increasing numbers of African American men teachers; they are not in the position of being the only one at Clark. In the earliest years of the school there were

three or four men on school staff; during 2000-2002 African American men comprised more than 24% of the first grade through fourth grades and fine arts staff. In 2001/2002, seven were classroom teachers, one was a student teacher, and two taught “auxiliary” courses in the fine arts. In addition to these men who have primary classroom responsibility, there are several other African American men on campus – one serving as assistant principal, one special education teacher, and three more in support roles such as social service staff and educational aides.

While still a numerical minority, the men staff have a significant presence. This is in contrast to other work which suggests that male teachers may feel “out of place” in a female-dominated school environment. (See Allan, 1993). This was particularly true for men teachers who were the only “token” in a school. This is not to say that men teachers at Clark did not experience being out of place; several did talk about elementary school as being “women-dominated” and that they wanted to inject a different perspective into the environment. The larger point, however, is that there were enough African American men teachers at the school to provide several opportunities for finding support from other African American men. Also, there were enough African American men for the women teachers and staff to consider them collectively as a force at the school.

The men teachers are clustered in the older grades, with the majority teaching in the highest grade at the school, in this case – fourth grade. There are no men teachers in kindergarten or first grade, and only one teaching second grade. With the exception of one a fine arts teacher who has taught for 16 years, most of those at the

middle school level, the other male teachers have taught six years or less. In addition, there is one white male on staff who serves as a content specialist. He had over 25 years of teaching experience and had been a part of Clark since it opened.

The men teachers said they preferred the older children, with the exception of one teacher who said he preferred pre-Kindergarten but there had not been an opening for that class, and the one second grade teacher who liked working with younger children. This second grade teacher faced pressure from the principal to “move up” to the third grade, but told him it was his choice. He chose to stay with the second grade for several reasons. He liked his team members and also did not want to teach a “TAAS grade” which meant a lot of extra pressure to make sure his students passed the high-stakes exam. The next year (when he had chosen to remain in second grade) there was an influx of students which resulted in the need for an additional third grade classroom to maintain the appropriate student-teacher ratio. The administrators reassigned him to third grade after the school year had started. When I asked him why he was chosen to move to third grade he said that he had the most experience of the second grade team (with the exception of the team leader) and that the principal wanted him to get experience in a TAAS grade because that was required in order to become a school administrator. This was rather curious to me since he had not expressed a desire to be an administrator, and had clearly indicated his preference to remain as a second grade teacher.

“Letting men be men”

Without exception, all of the staff and teachers that I spoke with said they thought having so many men part of the school staff was positive. One teacher did express concern, however, that the men needed to be “strong.” I didn’t know what she meant, and asked for clarification:

Ms. G: It’s [having male teachers] positive only if they ARE positive strong male role models. If they’re strong males – let’s just leave it at that. [laughs].

KF: Are you saying that you don’t think some of them are?

Ms. G: No.

KF: Are you talking like in terms of...

Ms. G: Just um - sexual preference [laughs]. And like I said, that’s okay – but children do model – they – I mean, I hear mine all the time, and when I use my little sarcasm, okay? And they do model you. So, you know, I think that a strong positive male image is what they need, um, and then you know, when they get older, they can make whatever sexual preference or whatever they want to make. But, I mean, there are a couple of questionables – you know, maybe one especially, or two that you know, when you act that way, then the children will model you, and so...it's not even giving them a chance – like I said, I don’t want to say “the right way” – you know, to see the right way. I don’t want to keep saying right like I’m right and somebody is wrong. I don’t want to say that - I don’t want to come off as that, because whatever anybody wants to do behind closed doors is their business, but when you’re dealing with impressionable children – I just believe that, especially males – they need to be a strong role model.

I did not hear a reservation about homosexuality expressed by other teachers, although other research found that male teachers of young children faced concerns about pedophilia (Sargent, 2000; DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997; Murray, 1996) These fears are often linked with homophobic attitudes. (See Blount, 2000 for a discussion of this link.) This teacher does not so much describe what a good role model

transmits to the children; instead, she expresses the idea that a “strong role model” implies a heterosexual male.

In contrast, other women teachers at Clark usually pointed out the “maleness” and a certain kind of “masculinity” of the male teachers. As one staff said, “We allow our men to be masculine”:

Ms. C: ...They get to be men. We don't make them into elementary school teachers, you know.

KF: Tell me about that.

Ms. C: Well it's just – I've just seen and heard that ...male elementary school teachers – they're soft, they're weak, you know? They can't handle the high school boys. They can't handle this, you know, they have, uh, less dominant personalities. And as you know, that is certainly not true here! [laughs]. They get an opportunity to be men. We don't mute their maleness – we encourage it. We want for them to stand up and be leaders. Uh, last night at TAAS Family Night the men hosted the show, you know, the men were our entertainment – and you missed that – and my goodness! They did a step routine which was quite interesting. [laughs]. You know, they're encouraged to be men. They're encouraged to have relationships with the male students, and even the female students. You know, we want for the kids to see strong, particularly Black men. Mr. Stewart is not Black – but he is a man just the same, you know? And he uses his voice control. The women have the look – the men have the voices [laughs] – we're looking and their stern voice “get in line – be quiet.” Also, that they go to school too. Men finish college, and men have professional jobs, you know, they have to do something as far as making a commitment to their education to even be here. They're [the students] surrounded by professional women all day long – they know we went to college, but to say, “no, so did he!”

(Ms. Chelsea, social service team member)

One explicit goal for allowing the “men to be men” is so they can pass that along to the boys:

Once they [African American men] get here, teach them – the young men how to be, to set up an environment where you are going to allow

them to be the men – to teach the boys how to be men. I think that’s important – it’s not enough to just have a Black teacher, or a Black male teacher – that’s not enough. It’s not enough. That is not enough. At all. [laughs]. Not at all. But to have an environment that they embrace, or foster – allowing you to be the man, so that you can teach someone else to be the man. That’s the biggest thing for me.... And I think that this environment enables them to be the man, so that they feel comfortable enough that [they] know [they] can step outside of just the academic role and also teach these boys how to be men as well. (Ms. Smithson, fourth grade teacher)

We start to see that “maleness” is connected with being “strong” in various capacities, whether through leadership, with men serving as hosts or directing various programs. Male teachers are also noted for their strength, and for aspects of their physiques and deep voices which signal their masculinity.

Procedures during the disaster drill are emblematic of seeing men as leaders and as possessing physical strength. During the drills, the men as a group are given special tasks, which I discovered when one of my interviews was interrupted by the alarm bells. The men go to various posts, ensuring that the external doors are locked, and the (women) teachers and classes either stay in their classrooms or go into the halls. It is a “lock down” scenario. The male teachers, whether they would choose it or not, are assigned to guard the perimeter, thereby reinforcing the image of male physical power and protection.

Men as role models

African American men are important role models at Clark Elementary. One of the bulletin boards in a heavily trafficked corridor says “Real Men Read.” It has

large pictures of the men teachers reading books, partly created in response to the low reading scores of the African American boys (in comparison with all other subgroups at Clark) on the state-wide Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) which had occurred two years previously. The idea of having the men teachers displayed was to convey to the students that reading was “cool”, and that even men do it. I suppose the implication is that not just nerdy women teachers and librarians like books!

One of the African American male teachers who had been at Clark for five years explains the need for men to be role models:

It’s a lot of tender loving care that actually is helping our school seriously. If the teachers didn’t care, I don’t think the kids would respond as well. When I first got here the kids didn’t have many male role models, especially African-American male role models, and now there are quite a few of us. I think Ms. Wilson is consciously trying to introduce that to these kids who are coming from homes who do not have male role models in the house....They’re [the students] used to seeing males teach now. I even had a young man say he wants to become a teacher, and he’s the first one – this year – the first male. (Mr. Mathison)

The need for role models was the most frequently stated reason for why it was important to have African American men on staff. School staff directly related this need to the home situations of many of the students. Many teachers noted that most of the children came from single-parent households and did not live with their fathers.³¹

³¹ McCormick, 1994; Gaskell & Willinsky, 1995; and Wood & Hoag, 1993 also discuss the social changes including the increase in single parent families and how this has led to the view that male role models are a needed addition in schools.

I think that any male figure – a positive male figure I should say – on any campus, is a joy to have. But I think in our particular case here, we have such a high percentage of minority students – Black students here – and then of those students, they live in single parent households, and most likely the single parent is NOT a male figure, and so when you see the boys, and they don't know how to be young men. When I grew up, I grew up around young men, and learned – my brothers were taught how to be young men, and what that expectation is to see in a child. And I do think it is a positive thing to have a role model.

(Ms. Smithson, fourth grade teacher)

I think it has a positive effect because a lot of these children don't even – don't see men. They don't have men in their lives, and like I said, that goes into a totally different issue of the home life again.

(Ms. Bradley , fourth grade teacher)

Many teachers saw the “African American man teacher as role model” as particularly important in developing a certain climate at the school. Some teachers noted that it is important for both boys as well as girls, to see men and women interacting in healthy, responsible ways that may be different than what they see at home. (Again we see the idea that students' home lives are lacking.) It is not so much about the male as a role model within the particular classroom, as much as it seems to be about the role of a male adult in general – how does a man act? How do men treat other people and care for children? Of course, examples such as the “Real Men Read” wall purposely highlight academic behaviors that men participate in, such as reading books. Yet most of the women teachers' responses about the contribution of men to Clark spoke to the need for teaching something about responsible masculinity, and not about how the men brought some innovative teaching technique to the students.

Having men teachers at the school is perceived by some teachers and administrators as a way to offer something to the community. That parents sometimes request male teachers when they enroll their child is one indication that men teachers are viewed as a positive addition to Clark by some parents. Mr. Banks, a second grade teacher describes his experience:

A lot of them request me because a lot of the parents, like the ones that are real active in the school – they walk around school and they watch. They watch. Like, I’ve had a lot of parents who say ‘I saw you since my son or daughter was in kindergarten. And when my child gets to this grade, I want this person to be their teacher.’ And a lot of the women who don’t have a husband – like my class is majority boys. I always get the mothers who say ‘I want him because he’s a male teacher and my son needs that.’

Mr. Banks’ class did have more boys assigned to it. The boy-girl composition changed according to which students withdrew, but overall, the boys in his class outnumbered girls two to one. This was not the case in other second grade classrooms which were more equally divided between boys and girls. In part, this could be the result of parents requesting Mr. Banks; it could also be the result of the registrar who made decisions about where to place new students who enrolled at Clark.

The general procedure was to place a new student into whichever class had the lowest enrollment. At times, however, the registrar did not follow this policy, especially in cases where she thought the new student would particularly benefit from a specific teacher. In particular, she sometimes assigned students to men teachers’ classrooms if she thought the student would benefit from a man’s presence. I

observed the registrar do intakes of new students. A mother and her son came to enroll, and there had been a lapse of a few weeks since her son's most recent school attendance:

After she left I asked Ms. Rawlins about the lapse in dates. She said that the woman had told her that the boy's father had been killed, and so that was the reason for the lapse as well as the move. She said also that in light of that, she wanted to place him in a classroom with a male teacher – so she assigned him to Mr. Watkins' class.

(Field Notes 2/19/2002)

The registrar did not ask the mother; she made the decision with the goal of helping the student and family. Now that the father was gone, she thought that a man teacher would be the best choice for the student.

“Daddy doesn't play” – or does he? Men teachers and discipline

Ideas about men's ability to discipline African American boys made it important for men to teach the older boys as they became viewed as more “unruly” and in need of more intervention the older they became. Some women teachers expressed the belief that boys would not listen to women as much as they would listen to men. One way that women at Clark allow (and also expect) the men teachers to “be men” is by calling upon them to intervene with boys in certain discipline situations, as in this account by the woman after school coordinator:

I've had to take students to men and say “Just please take care of this. Because it's a road block – a communication block bigger than me, so I just need you to please [laughs] – can you please mentor? Before I kill him? [laughs]”. But sometimes you need that – that partnership – and we realize, Ms. Wilson realizes, and the rest of us realize that

that's why, you know, in most family situations, it's the male and the female parent. Because what one doesn't have – the other one has. And you need that balance. Also, I think that they get to be men.

The perception that the men teachers “add something different” does not mean that they all add the same thing. While several of the women teachers talked about the benefits of having men to provide discipline for the boys, the men teachers talked about a variety of discipline styles and approaches to classroom management. On one end of the spectrum are Mr. Mathison and Mr. Watkins who are self-described “softies.” Mr. Mathison, who was described by other teachers as gentle and kind, says that he has problems with classroom management:

Like I said, I taught in [another school district] not too far away ten years ago – the kids were a little bit different, and when I came back almost ten years later – uh, quite different....I've walked into quite a few changes – so it wasn't as easy just to teach [when he came to Clark as compared with the other school district] so I had to [work on] classroom management. They actually sent me to a couple of workshops, and I've been working on that year after year. But uh, I'm really a nice person [laughs] – uh, I really love kids, so it's been really a harsh thing for me to actually carry out a punishment, because I didn't really like to see a kid suffer [laughs]. But over the years, what's happened is, I've pretty much determined that no matter what I say, I have to actually do it. And that I have to be prepared on what I'm going to say, because if I'm not prepared to do it, then the kids notice it.

He went on to tell about a student who told him that he continued to misbehave in his classroom because he never punished the student:

[The student said], “You've always said you were going to do this to me, but you never do.” And I said, “I'm glad you told me that. You've taught me something. You've helped me out quite a bit.”

Mr. Watkins, another fourth grade teacher who struggles with classroom management, says that it is one of his biggest areas of challenge. He, like several other teachers (both men and women), experiences a tension between keeping the students in the classroom versus sending a student to in-school suspension:

You want the child in the classroom. Usually, if a child is causing a disruption in the classroom it's surely reflected in his academics, and so those children – you know that they should be in class. I mean, I have a student in [in-school suspension] right now. Should he be in class? Yes he should. He really needs to be there. But you know, they just try you and try you and try you, and at one point you have to draw the line... You have to be disciplined yourself, because if you are not consistent in your application of discipline then, you know, things fall down... You're the wicked witch of the west, or the warlock on the south if you do it in the beginning, but in the long run that's what's best. But I give them too many chances to where I'm-pulling-my-hair-out chances.

Mr. Watkins' sister, also an educator, told him not to give that much power to a child's misbehavior – just keep teaching. He tries to do that and address the problem at the proper time – “you can avoid embarrassment and awkward situations if you do it that way.” Mr. Mathison and Mr. Watkins were not examples of strong disciplinarians and were the first to admit that they were not very good at “taking care of things” like some of the women teachers wanted them to be.

This “nice guy” approach is in sharp contrast to Mr. Whitfield's approach, a former Marine who taught middle-school boys at another school in the City before coming to Clark this year. He tells his class they get one chance and that's it:

They don't give me any problem. But like I told them, a lot of them, you know, may have female bashing a little, or not responding if they are not a man. Because I know how it is at home. Mother can say things over and over and might have to holler, but I can say it one time

because “Daddy doesn’t play” [laughs] you know? Because it’s just that I will give you one chance, because I know in life you only have one chance. And I tell my boys that all the time – you can’t keep messing up and getting off. I mean, in life, there’s one chance. And what you mess up you get penalized for, you know? They don’t keep giving you chances. That first time it happens – straight up.

Mr. Whitfield also emphasized physical discipline. He was one of the male teachers who taught an all-male class called “Cadets”. Twice a week these students wore fatigues instead of their school uniform, and participated in calisthenics on those days. In addition, Mr. Whitfield liked his class to walk in the hallways in a military style, with “cutting the corners” which meant turning corners in a sharp, stylized manner. He also incorporated physical punishments such as push-ups as a form of classroom discipline. In conjunction with this approach, he said that he also uses “lots of positive reinforcements”. His approach to discipline was a stark contrast with the other men teachers, in part because of his position as one of the teachers of the two all-boy classrooms, but also linked with his own military background and his ideas about what his boy students needed to succeed in life.

Mr. Whitfield was the only man who told me he used (or who I observed using) using physical punishments. I observed two women teachers, however, use this approach on occasion. One came from a military background and sometimes had her second grade class hold their arms out in front of them while squatting. This was usually punishment for being too noisy or not following her directions. The other teacher occasionally would swat a child or grab a student rather forcefully by the arm. It is interesting that although only one man teacher had a “get (physically) tough”

approach, there was an idea among some of the women teachers that the men were the “real” disciplinarians who could straighten out the boys.

Otherfathers

Although much more attention has been given to “othermothers” and the kin networks of African American women (for example Collins, 1991; Stack, 1974), recent research suggests a similar role for men . In research with African American families with preschool children male relatives and the mother’s romantic partner participate in “social fathering” (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Some male elementary teacher at Clark can be viewed in this way – and frame their participation with students in this way.

Family language, which was discussed in Chapter 5, is also used by the men teachers, although different from how most of the women teachers used it. The women teachers who use variations on the family theme talk about it primarily in terms of helping create a classroom environment, and particularly an environment that reminds and encourages the students to treat each other like brothers and sisters. When the male teachers used family imagery, more often it related to their relationship with individual students, not so much emphasizing classroom relationships between the students. Being a father-figure is connected to being a role model for many of the men teachers.

Mr. Banks, the second grade teacher, talks about how he wants his class to feel comfortable with him and in his description draws upon parental imagery:

We get like a rapport to let them know that I'm here to help you, as well as be your teacher. And I can be your friend, too. But uh, I don't want them to think that we're friends like 'chummy chummy we're going to hang out' friends – but I want them to feel comfortable with me, and not be like afraid of me and you know, trust me enough and felt like they can talk to me. So I'm stern but I'm soft, too...I want them to know that, you know, if something's not right at home, you can come to me and talk about it. And I think that's why, I mean, if you see me with my kids – they want to hug, and they want to tell me goodbye, and have a great weekend. I mean, it's like I told them, I said, when you're at school, I'm your mother, I'm your father, I'm your grandmother. I mean, 'cause when you go home – what? You eat and you pretty much go to sleep. So I'm your parent Monday through Friday, and I want them to know that they can talk to me. But at the same time they're not going to disrespect me and disrupt my class and be disobedient.

Another male teacher, Mr. Whitfield, describes what he likes about having a single-sex classroom and relates it to his relationship with his students:

Well, I can give them – I mean – there are a lot of things that I can't say in the female and male classes – and it's just like, when I come in – my first day's speech or my second day's speech is basically getting to know them on, you know, a one-to-one basis. And I tell them that they are all my kids – so all of them are my sons. How ever many children – that's how many sons I have here. I'm here for whatever you need. So you know, I sit down, and I talk – just like in the military – just like from civilian to sailor. And I give them the steps – and just basically good guidelines to follow in life.

Mr. Whitfield, like several of the other male teachers, makes a connection between being a surrogate father figure and teaching about life – not only about academic matters. This is certainly not an unusual idea – most teachers I talked with noted

things they taught in the classroom beyond “reading, writing and ‘rithmetic.”³² What is notable that teaching about life here is connected to the father-figure role, and not just to the role of teacher. Mr. Mathison, a 4th grade teacher, shares a similar perspective:

Mr. M: I pretty much figured out a LOT that I’m acting as a parent quite a bit. You know, teaching things that a parent would normally teach, like morality [he sighs]. Right and wrong, you know – several things that, you know, back when we were in school kids pretty much knew what was expected of them. You know, as far as making good and bad choices. Sometimes I feel like – sometimes more of a parent than a teacher....I even have found that the way that I teach now is uh, definitely bringing in the real world....So you know, when I’m talking to them, I’m telling them basically something that my father would tell me – that the decisions and habits you are forming right now are not going to help you when you are ready – when you are an adult – when you’re twenty years old and ready to go out into the world, on your own. You know, if you have these same bad habits, this is where you’ll be as an adult. Do you draw that picture – would you want to be an adult who cannot get their money together? Would you want to be an adult that cannot follow simple direction from somebody who’s an authority? You give them situations – so I do that, plus, you know, I’m always giving out money.

KF: You give out money?

Mr. M: [laughs] Well if a kid may want to go to an after school program, and a lot of them can’t afford it, and if they have had good discipline, and their conduct has been great, you know, sometimes I give it as a push to get them on the right road. That’s happened a lot. Pretty much being a parent – even on the financial level.

(Mr. Mathison)

³² Ladson-Billings, in her review of pedagogical literature about urban students and teachers, notes several components that “successful teacher of African-American children” use. Some of these components are a focus on the whole child, moving beyond the cognitive level to include other aspects of development – including ethical, moral and personal. This more inclusive approach to teaching was discussed by the majority of teachers as they described the things they taught in the classroom beyond “the academics.”

Both Mr. Banks and Mr. Mathison describe their participation as a parent, not exclusively as a “father”. Mr. Banks says, “I’m your mother, I’m your father, I’m your grandmother”, and Mr. Mathison twice refers to himself as a “parent”. While the overt purpose of hiring African American men was to fill in as male role models in light of the lack of fathers, not all teachers embraced this narrow view of their role as teacher.

One part of being a parent-figure and expressing care for the students was very different for women and men teachers. Views about touching the children differed between men and women. In almost every interview with a man at Clark Elementary, the issue of touching the students came up. This was not on my list of questions, but most of the men brought it up as something they had to deal with, in a different way from the women teachers. In some women teachers’ accounts, they spoke about caring for the students as including “being willing to give lots of hugs”. Many times I experienced children rushing up to hug me, some who knew me, and even some who I did not recognize. Women could more readily participate in this behavior compared with the men teachers, who felt much more constrained in this area.

Contact between teachers and students can be a mark of relationship, and can help particular students become more integrated into the classroom (Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden, 1995). Several men teachers thought that touch, especially in the elementary years, was important, but something off limits to them, due to fears about being accused of pedophilia. In this excerpt, Mr. Jones, a student teacher, has just

explained to me his policy that “all he gives are handshakes – never hugs”. I asked him what he does when the children run up to him to give him a hug:

Sometimes, sometimes – sometimes they catch me off guard, and I tell them straightforward – I don’t give hugs. I’m telling you now, it’s not that I don’t love you, not that I don’t care about you, but I myself don’t give hugs. Or they run up to me, and I can see them – sometimes I’ll put my palm straight out and I’ll catch them right in the forehead, and it stops them right there. Or sometimes – a lot of times I’ll stick my hand out, so they understand that I’m not going to give them a hug, but a handshake. But I think that’s a major disadvantage to being a male teacher, and also a Black male teacher. Because males are looked at – they want us here in the classroom, in the school setting, but they don’t look at us quite as females. Females can get away with a lot more than the males can. Which is, I understand why our society does it, so my opinion is I understand how things are run, so I just play the game.

Mr. Jones’ views are similar to other men elementary teachers who see this inability to touch children as being a disadvantage (see for example, Sargent, 2000). Women teachers are able to express affection more openly and not experience the same level of suspicion. All teachers are cautioned not to touch children, yet the suspicion is higher for men teachers. This is also an example of a formal policy which is ignored by many teachers because they think the children need hugs and other forms of affectionate contact to thrive at school.

Race and “Being able to relate”

Several of the African American men teachers agreed that the boys benefited from their presence at the school in part because they could “relate” with the students because they had experienced similar situations or had behaved in similar ways when they were in school. Mr. James talked about growing up in the housing projects and

facing racism in another Texas town; Mr. Watkins spoke of being the “underdog” so he “naturally” (his words) could root for others in a similar position. Mr. Jones described his less-than-stellar behavior when he was in school in the younger grades, “I’m strict, you know, because I was like them. I was very hyper, very bad in school – mischievous – always into stuff, giving teachers a hard time”.

The “ability to relate” was connected to the importance of having a staff which matched the racial background of the students. Mr. James explained that before he started teaching at Clark he was a substitute teacher in other schools in the district that also had “high minority ranks” but whose staff was more diversified.

We don’t have but maybe five Caucasians here – if we have that many. And the other schools would have like 17 and 20 – and it’s just a proven fact that every culture thinks differently, approaches situations differently, and reads situations differently. And it can cause a lot of problems. Like a lot of the young Black men – the Black boys in particular, get in trouble a lot from looking like they want to fight the teacher. But it’s not that. It’s that a lot of the time the teachers would expect them to look at them as they are being scolded, but in our culture, which was pretty much always dominated by our grandmothers – on down to the mothers, you didn’t look at them – knowing that they were scolding you on something you know you were wrong for – so it’s “yes, ma’am, yes ma’am, yes ma’am [he says this with downcast eyes]” and then you went on. Well, when they get to school it’s a different story – they want them to look at them [in the eyes] and say “yes ma’am, yes ma’am.” And that is an act of disrespect as they were taught. So when they are forced to look at them, they’re looking at them bad. And then they’re written up because they want to fight the teacher. And true enough, they may be standing there huffing and puffing with their fist balled – but they’ve been forced to do something they’ve been taught all their life not to do. A lot of times its miscues like that that teachers have that eventually evolved to ALC [alternative learning center], suspension.

He talked about two students who came to Clark and ended up in his class after not achieving at other schools.

The parents were like ‘let’s change schools’. When they get here, the parents’ situation is still the same throughout, but the child changes their attitude towards school when they’re here. It might be because our staff is like 90% minority – and our school is like 95% minority. So the children are probably more eager to identify with what the teacher is telling them as opposed to what they were hearing at other schools.

Another staff member told why she thinks it is important for the environment to be primarily African-American:

The majority of the staff are African American from the custodian to the kitchen to the staff members. They’re African American to meet the needs of these children so that they can relate, because they come with baggage that the other side of the world don’t even have a clue what they’re dealing with. Some issues – so our teachers can be more patient, so to speak, and be more long-suffering but at the same time holding the child to his or her responsibility with his or her actions....I understand what you’re going through, but this is how it’s really done in the real world, and then work that out.

(Ms. Tucker, social service team member)

These teachers’ ideas remind us of the difference between the “culture of home” and the “culture of power” that many non-white students have to negotiate at school (Delpit, 1988). In schools with mostly white faculty, African American students are at a disadvantage because they operate from a culture different from the dominant culture of the school. This can lead to students being misunderstood, as in the example of Mr. James and the “miscues” his students experienced at schools with few African American teachers. In part, what the teachers at Clark talked about was helping their students learn how to code switch so when they went on to schools with

more white teachers, fewer of these misunderstandings would occur. It was important for many of the teachers that they were African American just like the majority of students, which would help remove some of the barriers to communication.

The creation of Boys to Men: Men as more than individual role models

To capitalize on the high numbers of men in the building, the Clark Men's group was started last year, after some prodding by the principal. She wanted the male teachers and other staff to have a more visible presence, and also take on more leadership roles in the school. This group consisted of all the adult men in the building. They periodically meet in a "boys only" atmosphere (called "Boys to Men") as a way for the men to address certain issues with the boys.³³ For example, earlier in the year some of the boys were acting inappropriately in the bathrooms. The men addressed this concern with the boys in a setting that decreased embarrassment but which got the point across. As one of the teachers explained, they can use humor and it can be a bonding kind of time, but the information gets communicated that they need to behave and work hard in school. The group also planned a Flag Football day for third and fourth grade boys. It was held on a Saturday and was very well-attended by families and the student body. In this way the Boys to Men group not only provided a fun activity for the students, but also created an enjoyable time for families to be at the school.

³³ I did not feel welcome attending these events; I rely on interview material and other informal conversations for information about these meetings.

Boys to Men is an arena for the men school staff to reach out to all the boys in the school – not only to those boys who happen to have a man as a classroom teacher.

Mr. Jones explains what he sees as the purpose of Boys to Men:

The Boys to Men is a program that is designed to try and fill the void – the gap – and telling the young man who may not have a male figure about being Black men in this environment. You know, a lot of times they don't see positive images of Black men in this environment. It's just the truth of the whole matter. A lot of times they see Black men going to jail, society has them in police cars – I'm just being honest here. Or just negative images of Black men. Or they may not have a father – we're here trying to fill the void – saying that there are some Black men out here that are doing the right thing. There are some that are doing these things. And that there's hope for you too. You know, we're leading by example. Look at our lives, you know, we're coming to work every day, uh, we went to college, we did these different things just to be here today, just to teach you, so look at our lives as an example of how you want to live your life, you know, because so many images, when they leave these school walls – they're going to see the old boy on the corner, they're going to see the old boy talking crazy, you know, not talking in the correct way. They say "you're white". Well, I say that it's talking standardized language, that's what I say. I tell them the most important thing is a person that is bilingual – you can speak both...I try to show them that I am professional, and I am a professional person, and can go back and forth between language dialects. You have to be able to speak and relate to both people. You know, you have to be able to do both, so the Clark Men here are just showing that to the students.

In addition to providing a variety of male role models for the boys, and helping the boys decode what they may see and experience in their environments, the group also serves as a way for the boys to know that the men staff are "pulling" for them. There is a connection to be maintained between the men and the boys. Mr. Avery describes a purpose of Boys to Men that goes beyond the occasional meetings:

Basically, we require the guys to take responsibility for themselves and their behavior – not allowing them to take the easy way out. It's not “cause I'm a boy I don't have to do this” – no, that's not it. You still got some obligations and responsibilities. Um, when we see them on campus we make sure that they are doing what they are supposed to do – staying on task, those kinds of things. Handling themselves in a different fashion, you know, creating that idea – a groundswell of expectancy. This is where things are going, and this is what's going to be expected of you and yes, I'm here and yes I'm watching you and yes we are all pulling for you – and also demanding that you do some things that you are supposed to do.

Boys to Men, then, serves multiple purposes. The men can help the boys translate what they experience in their neighborhoods and what they see in the media; they provide a variety of models of African American men who have negotiated the professional and academic world and still maintained their ethnic identity and masculinity; they provide social capital (see Coleman, 1990) in the sense of shared norms and expectations, as Mr. Avery calls “a groundswell of expectancy”, which hold the boys to certain standards of behavior and expectations for hard work and success in school.

On the other hand, some of the girls felt left out and wanted their own “girls only” club. Several of the women teachers tried to dissuade them, telling them that “they didn't really need it – that they already had the advantages, and that the boys weren't doing as well so that's why they had a special group”. (This quote was from one of the teachers who tried to convince the girls not to form a group). The girls and several other women teachers were not satisfied with this response and formed their own group, modeled after a sorority. Once the two groups had started, everyone agreed that the women had a much more organized program, and were more

consistent in their meetings. The men's group received a lot of acclaim for their special events, such as the flag football tournament and their participation in the school talent show, but it was the girls and women who had more opportunity through repeated interactions for the transmission of expectations and connection between adults and students.

Discussion

This chapter examines one elementary school that aggressively seeks African American men teachers as a way to create an environment that focuses attention on the boy students who, as a group in recent years had fallen behind in academic achievement. Ms. Wilson starts by hiring teachers who are African American because the majority of her students are African American; this is an attempt to combat “disidentification” by providing caring adults who understand the culture and experiences of the students. As Mr. James noted, teachers (who are not of the same ethnic background as a student) sometimes misinterpret certain behaviors because they are not familiar with the culture. Also, they may confuse confidence and pride with an “attitude problem.” Many researchers would agree with him. (See for example Majors and Billson, 1992; Irvine, 1990; Sewell, 1997).³⁴ Others suggest the

³⁴ Of course, there is no one “culture” of African descended people. Furthermore, class and gender create different nuances and interpretations of interactions. For example, in one interview, an African American woman teacher who came from a middle-class two-parent family described the students as “bad Black kids who didn’t know how to act.” One reason she chose to teach at Clark was to try to counteract their behavior and “fix” them.

need for middle class participation in the African American community (for example see Ogbu 1992). This role modeling communicates that academic achievement can be connected to personal or community success. Clark takes both of these approaches, and takes them a step further by specifically recruiting men to participate as teachers. Having male teachers is perceived as a way to address community needs. It is like the principal has taken a page straight out of the numerous programs which report on the positive results which occur with the injection of male role models into an academic environment.

In this sense, the principal addresses what she perceives as community needs on two levels: one is that the male teachers provide a proxy for a father, and they also provide an example of a professional. The women teachers do this, too, but there is an extra weight assigned to the presence of the men professionals, especially because there are fewer men in the students' lives, and also because of the preponderance of negative images - men and boys as drug dealers, men in jail, men who are absent for various reasons.

This seeking of African American men teachers can be considered a form of what Siddle Walker calls institutional caring. The men's presence was not happenstance since they were heavily recruited and invited to participate in a particular school environment. The "maleness" as well as the "African American-ness" of the teachers is welcomed and encouraged. In part, this fits nicely with the family imagery that so many of the teachers and staff use; there is a place for men in the school as a surrogate father which complements the maternal images that many of

the women teachers call upon. Similar to Foster's research, the kin imagery makes explicit a connection between teachers and students (see Foster, 1994). It is a metaphor which serves multiple purposes: It evokes the care implicit in the parental-child relationship, but also the authority. It provides a familiar arena for participation by both men and women, yet one that needs to be examined carefully to see which messages are being communicated. As other research shows, simply having men does not guarantee that images of gender or attitudes about gender will get better – it could be the case that stereotypical gender messages are further reinforced. (See for example, Roulston & Mills, 2000; Ashcraft & Sevier, 2001).

Many of the women teachers' comments about why it is important to have male teachers reinforce the separation between the genders and who can teach what to whom. In appealing to the male teachers for help with discipline, they perhaps send the message to the boys that the men have the final word, and accordingly, that the women teachers do not carry the same authority. The men are set apart as an alternative authority figure. Teachers and administrators did not seem to consider this a negative situation – rather, they embraced the differences, as they put it. There were many comments made that communicated “men and women are different” and have different things to contribute to the school setting, and specifically to the boys. These kinds of statements were often prefaced by phrases like “I don't care what people say...” or “No matter what some people think....”

This sharp line of distinction between the men and women was mirrored in how the boys and girls were separated. Lining up to go to recess, for example,

invariably occurred in boy and girl lines. One fourth grade teacher talked about how her class is like “little couples.” She talked to her girls about how if they want the boys to do nice things for them, the girls need to allow the boys to be chivalrous. She pointed out that having men at the school was great because it gave the students a visual display of how men treat women – by doing such things as opening the doors for them and helping them carry heavy items. In return for the boys letting the girls “go first”, the girls then reciprocated by “taking care of” the boys, such as by reminding them to turn in an assignment or telling them they are being too loud. While part of the boy-girl separation most likely has to do with the developmental stages of the students, the gender divisions were very strong and reinforced stereotypical ideas about girls as helpers and boys as those who take care of and protect girls.

It is interesting that the principal encouraged the male African American assistant principal to get the men to “step up and take leadership.” The men did not create this formal group themselves, but were called to serve and lead and “be men.” Part of the reason that the principal wanted such a group was to encourage the men to take more responsibility and share the load of everyday school processes, such as committee work, with the women teachers. The group appealed to their importance at the school, and to their identification as men and the stereotype of male leadership, as a way to get them to pitch in. This, of course, was in addition to their other primary function of serving as male role models for the boys.

In a similar vein, recall the second grade teacher who was encouraged to consider the administration track. This teacher's experience is a good example of what Williams' (1995) describes as the way men in female-dominated occupations experience a "push" for promotion. In addition to this example, beliefs about men, masculinity, and authority help place male teachers in the older grades. This is a national trend; only 2% of pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teachers are men of any race, while the number is approximately 20% for elementary teachers, with most teaching in the higher grades (4-6).³⁵ While third and fourth grade students are relatively young children, these grades represent the oldest children at Clark Elementary.

With this kind of extra emphasis, it seems as though the treatment of African American men elementary teachers at Clark is consistent with other men in traditionally female occupations. Williams (1995) describes the advantages that men experience in female-dominated occupations such as nursing, education and secretarial work. The atmosphere at Clark does highly value the male-ness of the teachers. In contrast with Allan's (1993) work, in which some of the women teachers seem to resent the advantages that the male tokenized teachers receive, this does not appear to be the case at Clark. Instead, a common element of wanting to serve the needs of the students is an overarching theme – and at Clark, one way to do this is by welcoming African American men into the elementary environment. It also may be

³⁵ 1990 Census: Detailed Occupation by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex
<http://censtats.census.gov/cgibin/eeo/eeojobs.pl>

in part because the men teachers at Clark do not have very much teaching experience and are not in structural positions of power. All of the grade level team leaders were women, and all of the content specialists were also women, with the exception of the sole white man who had twenty years more experience than the most experienced African American men teachers.

The “family metaphor” that many teachers used is one example of how Ladson-Billings describes a “blurring of distinction” between teacher and student in contrast with a rigid separation that occurs in some urban schools. Perhaps it is this metaphor which bridges the tension that the men, though not the “experts” in terms of teaching and therefore not in formal positions of power, still maintain an important role in the school. Even in a pre-Kindergarten through 4th grade setting with young students masculinity can be maintained. The male teachers can be men, and are valued for certain kinds of behaviors – the deep voice, using their physical presence – not “playing” --- yet they are also valued for being warm and kind and caring in the same ways that women teachers are. The presence of a number of men made the “father-mother” parallels strong. Williams talks about how men in mostly female occupations have to negotiate between two extremes – that of being too “feminine” and therefore “sissy” and that of being too “masculine” or “macho”. The father image encompasses a middle ground. It allows for the men to be “strong” yet also express warmth and caring.

Williams found that men tend to be over-represented in the “best” positions, meaning those with more prestige or higher pay. In the educational arena, men are

more often found in administration than in the classroom, for example. It is also because the men are perceived as “more stable” meaning they don’t have as many family responsibilities and will not be “stopping out” of the work world as many women do for family reasons. At Clark, the men teachers as a group are not the most stable or those with the most longevity at the school. Most are planning to leave after a few years for other pursuits, many citing the low pay as being untenable for supporting their families, or the families they would like to have some day. But this is a situation where the intersection of race and gender becomes clear: despite the strong possibility that the men will not stay for an extended period of time, they are still heavily desired because they are African American men. That they are men and African American is so highly valued that even if they only stay for a short time, it is still perceived as very valuable for the students because they can ostensibly provide an important component of culturally relevant education by virtue of their combination of race and gender. They could call upon their own experiences as having been African American boys to give them special knowledge about how to help their boy students “make it” in the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions

The education of children requires a partnership between the family, school and community. In the case of Clark Elementary, the school took an active approach in responding to the needs of the families. Three needs that Clark teachers and administrators faced were the challenges of high residential mobility, problems related to low-income and other instabilities in students' families, and the lack of African American men who were positive role models. The teachers' and administrators' responses to these situations were shaped and complicated by district and state policies, social class differences between teachers and families, and ideas about gender roles. A complex portrait emerged of a school confronting the intersections of poverty, race and ethnicity, class and gender in its mission to educate its students.

The influence of high-stakes testing

The pressure of the state-wide accountability test influenced the response to the community situation of high mobility. The emphasis on the test (and its reflection on the school and teachers) made it easy to focus on the academic issues (whether real or perceived) and less on the social and emotional consequences of student mobility. Although all public schools in Texas are required to participate in the TAAS testing, the experience varies greatly. In lower-income schools it is not

uncommon to have an intense focus on passing the TAAS test. In part, this is because if a school scores too low for a certain period of time, some school districts will reorganize the school, creating very specific ways to approach education, and sometimes replacing portions of the teaching and administrative staff. Schools have a large incentive to help their students pass these tests.

The pressure to do well on the TAAS tests shaped the school rhythms at Clark Elementary from the very beginning of the year. As test time approached, the stress in the school building was palpable. Students reported head- and stomach-aches, and teachers were stressed and snapping at one another. The school went into a very narrowly focused mode, with all staff mobilized to tutor children who were “on the bubble”. These were a group of students who were close to passing the test, but needed an extra push. Small groups of students met with school personnel who were not classroom teachers. Administrators and content specialists met with these students to provide extra tutoring, encouragement, and monitoring of progress.

Most teachers linked their concerns with mobility to the students’ performance on the TAAS tests. Clark Elementary focused its resources on helping students address academic problems related to mobility, such as individualized computer TAAS programs which were designed to help students overcome any curricular gaps they may have experienced. They also had TAAS rallies, parent nights to explain the TAAS test, etc. Mobility was not viewed as much of a problem in the social realm. Instead, teachers thought that students were “used to it”. They also mentioned that mobility was only one kind of instability that students faced.

This was interesting to me because the words “student mobility” was like a master narrative at Clark. Teachers held it up as the main problem facing the campus. It turned out that their idea of the main problem related specifically to passing the TAAS test. An overview of data for the 2001-2002 school year indicates that mobility may not be as closely related to performance on the TAAS tests as most teachers thought. While the data is not conclusive and only represents a cross-sectional snapshot, what is important is the focus on mobility as a main problem mainly for the academic realm. Few teachers mentioned that having to build relationships with parents throughout the year was a problem. But with the other problems of parental involvement, perhaps teachers did not hold out much hope for strong connections with the parents anyway. So in this sense, mobility (and the shifting membership in the school community) did not appear to be a particular problem if the majority of parents were not very involved in any case.

The broader context, beyond the school walls, also played a part in the ways in which mobility was viewed as a problem. Clark’s position in the district, as the “black sheep” (school staff’s description of themselves), tied in to their response to the district report saying that mobility was not a problem. Mobility came to represent their perceived position in the district; their ideas about the severity of student mobility was connected to their low status. As the district downplayed the consequences of mobility, Clark administrators and teachers perceived this as the district ignoring the challenges at their school. At the same time, it provided a way to talk about the struggles of Clark in a kind of code; teachers and others school staff did

not have to reinforce that it was the “Black kids on the wrong side of the tracks” who were having trouble in school. Instead, they could talk about the “mobility problem” without drawing attention to the racial composition of Clark.

Another facet of mobility acknowledged by the principal was high teacher turnover. Most teachers did not talk about this as complicating the situation at Clark Elementary. As mentioned previously, the principal had a reputation for serving as a mentor for African American teachers wanting to move into administration. Each year several teachers left Clark as they were assigned to Assistant Principal positions within Greene ISD. In addition, because Clark had a higher percentage of beginning teachers (compared to other school within the district), the school also experienced teachers leaving after their overwhelming first year. This may have made family-school interactions more difficult. New teachers may have little extra resources to devote to communicating with parents, especially if the parents are perceived as “difficult”. It may also explain teachers’ focus on academic concern rather than the social disruptions that can result from school mobility.

Complicated caring

Caring, like mobility, was an important catch-word at Clark. Teachers needed to be caring in order to respond to the many needs of the students and their families. But what did this care mean? In part, it meant that teachers were African American. The implication was that an African American teacher would have more of a willingness to teach these children. (Many teachers commented that when they told

other teachers at district events where they taught, the other teachers would ask them “why would you ever want to teach there?”) While not all African American teachers would agree with this idea, many did say that African American teachers have more of a responsibility toward “our” children. It is not true that the only teachers willing to teach African American children are African American; Ladson-Billings (2001) makes this point in *Crossing Over to Canaan*, which explores the teaching experiences of white teachers striving to be effective teachers for African American students.

According to Diemut Elisabet Bubeck(1995), caring work involves “looking after members of the household or extended family...It is often restricted to limited periods of time but can be time-consuming and require constant availability.” (1995: 25). It also includes meeting the emotional needs of the members of the family. It is this aspect of caring that adds a large burden to many teachers at Clark Elementary. The home lives of the children often result in students who are grappling with difficult emotional environments which carries over to the school day. Many teachers spoke of the way the children will take and take until you are sucked dry. They speak of caring at Clark as something which can be very emotionally draining. At the same time, many realize that ignoring the emotional realities will translate into an impediment to learning. So for teachers at Clark, caring means participating in this kind of emotional work which is often more relegated to the family sphere. By drawing on familial imagery, many teachers blend these spheres of family and school.

As teachers make a connection to their role as “mothers”, “fathers” and “parents” they are tapping into this kind of care work quite explicitly.

This approach ties in to the overlapping spheres of family, school and community which Epstein outlines (1995). According to her research, families will become more “school-like” and schools will become more “family-like” in order to assist children to have successful educations. Families become more “school-like” as they incorporate routines and activities which support educational endeavors. The idea of the schoolhome (Martin, 1992) is similar, in the sense that Martin thinks the school needs to be a place to make up for the “domestic vacuum” which is occurring in many families. Part of this provision of the domestic is the care, concern and connection between teachers and students. This is an ideal image, of the school mimicking an idyllic family setting. The reality at Clark was much less picture-perfect, with some teachers acting to create an alternate representation of family, different from their students’ home lives.

The interconnections between family, school, and community need to be supported at the school level, not confined to interpersonal relationships between individual teachers and parents. Siddie Walker addresses this with her concept of “institutional caring” in which a school can provide a setting which supports the relationships between teachers and families. At Clark, the principal took an institutional approach by hiring certain kinds of teachers, purposely selecting African American teachers and African American men in particular. Her efforts were to create a larger culture throughout the school – one that went beyond an individual

classroom. The principal, herself the first African American in that position in the district, was proud that she had hired a staff that was primarily African American.

The idea that a mismatch between students' and teachers' race and/or cultural background cause misunderstandings and difficulties in the educational realm imply that hiring teachers who match the student body would be a step in the right direction to reducing this sort of cultural distance. This approach is numerically not possible for a majority of schools due to the shortage of African Americans in teacher training programs. Yet, in areas where the possibility exists, having all-African American schools is discussed as one method to helping African American students succeed educationally. Ladson-Billings (1994) and Hale (2001) discuss how this race match may help reduce barriers and misunderstandings between teachers, students and parents. This is an important approach, and one not to be dismissed lightly. For the most part, these suggestions focus on the potential positive results that such matches may bring to school-family interactions. It is too simplistic, however, to hire teachers who match the racial background of students without considering several issues.

First, hiring African American teachers to match African American students does not recognize cultural diversity within the African American population. While some things may be shared in common, for example, experiences with racism within the United States, there is not one shared culture of all African American people. At Clark Elementary, some of the teachers had come to the United States as adults from Africa; others were from the South, and still others from other areas in the United States. While this did not seem to create major barriers between teachers and

families, the diversity within the African American population should not be ignored. It may mean that regional differences or other cultural differences should be acknowledged, rather than assuming that because someone's skin is "black" they must have a lot in common with other "black" people.

Furthermore, the situation at Clark points to a more complicated question. Clark hired teachers to match the majority of its African American students, but effectively ignored its Latino students. Clark Elementary during the time of this research was 85% African American. The majority of the other students were Latinos/as. With the exception of putting a few posters of Latinos in the hallways and celebrating Cinco de Mayo, the principal and teachers directed no special attention to this group of students. The assumption was that the Latino students were "doing fine". According to TAAS results from 2002, not all Latino students were succeeding. Latinas scored lower than African-American boys on all third and fourth grade TAAS tests with the exception of third grade math. The numbers of Latinas is relatively small, so caution is required in this comparison. The point, however, is that according to the TAAS results which were so highly emphasized at the school, this group is not "doing fine". Perhaps they were not a matter for concern because they were not perceived to be in the same sort of danger compared to African American boys.

As noted earlier, only a few teachers – among them the ESL specialist – commented that the school might not be serving the Latino students as well as it served the African American students. The few teachers who shared this perspective

were white. The school web-site boasts of a “culturally diverse staff”, but during 2000-2002 there was only one Latina classroom teacher (and she left six weeks into the year). Clearly, “culturally diverse” meant African American at Clark Elementary. The situation at Clark highlights a need to consider racial and ethnic relations in a more nuanced manner. Although African Americans and Latinos are both “non-white”, we see that in this case that did not automatically result in a sensitivity to the Latino students from the African American principal and teachers.

Second, it is important to consider the influence of social class divisions. Lareau (2000;2002), Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978), and Metz (1990) each address the ways social class differences or similarities between teachers and families shape interactions in schools. Teachers at Clark defined caring in many ways, including addressing a child’s emotional, physical and academic needs. We see, however, that the ideas about caring also were connected to social class. In other words, teachers thought that part of caring related to helping students learn lessons about a middle-class existence that most were not receiving at home.

Lessons learned from segregated schools earlier in the century instruct us about how in the best scenarios teachers and parents worked together. In these examples, teachers, parents and students also lived together in segregated neighborhoods. There is a certain type of that nostalgia in some of the writing about segregated African American schools of the past, especially those written to recall the positive aspects of those communities which were constrained by the laws and racial norms of that time. The situation is different today, as William J. Wilson (1996)

describes the flight of middle-class African Americans away from the inner-cities. Most teachers do not live within their school's attendance zone, and thus do not have the same kind of overlapping contact between school, church, at the market, or in the neighborhood with the students and their families. Without this kind of contact, social class differences may become more of a dividing line, as the everyday interactions away from the school are not there to help forge other connections between the school and family. In Coleman's (1990) terms, there is less social closure, in which teachers and parents have multiple opportunities to interact and reinforce norms with the children of the community.

At Clark, only one teacher lived in the neighborhood which comprised the attendance zone. The rest of the faculty drove in from outlying areas, and had little contact with the neighborhood, except for their occasional driving through and noting the "bad areas". This is similar to most schools, in which teachers do not usually live in the immediate area. It presents a break with the segregated schools of the past, however, in that there is little or no out-of-school contact between teachers and students and their families. What we see, then, is a situation in which the teachers have gone to college, and may be from a higher class background than the parents (either from their families of origin, or by attaining an education and moving up the social class ladder) – yet there is not the forced geographic connection of the past to facilitate interaction. It is not surprising that some of the attitudes expressed by teachers at Clark are not that different from attitudes of some white middle-class teachers about the deficits of low-income African American students and their

families. One way social class differences shape family-school interactions emerged as many teachers embraced stereotypes of low-income African American parents. Teachers did not necessarily have a wealth of information about parents' circumstances at home, yet sometimes interpreted their behavior as uncaring. Social class plays a part in these perceptions, and needs to be addressed, even in schools with all African American staff and students.

Considering the participation of African American men teachers

Part of making the school like a family at Clark included hiring men teachers to be part of the elementary environment. Specifically recruiting African American men teachers was a response to the community, and the lack of "positive" African American men role models in the students' families and the larger community. This was a clear attempt to fill in, especially for the boys, with whom there were concerns about their academic achievement, and also their relationships with women teachers.

This, on its face, also seems like a good idea. Yet we need to go beneath the surface. Some concerns (for me) at Clark were that men were hired for their "maleness". None of the African American men (except for one) had teaching certificates. Some had teaching experience, but several came from other occupations, never having taught before. I am not arguing that a teaching certificate necessarily signals a good teacher; yet it was striking that so few of the men had teacher training and relatively little experience. By her actions, the principal communicated that this was an acceptable exchange; having men in the elementary environment outweighed

the need for formal training or extensive experience. As she often said, “you can teach someone how to teach, but you can’t teach someone how to care”. The men’s willingness to work with students at Clark was taken to be evidence of their caring attitudes.³⁶

In addition, the role of men teachers should be interrogated. If men teachers are incorporated into a school environment to teach boys how to be men, it is important to figure out what kind of “men” they will be producing. Are we concerned about the kind of gender messages that are being sent, both by the men and the women? In the case of Clark, some of the women teachers seemed to have perceptions of the men teachers that were far more narrow than the men teachers had of themselves and their participation as elementary school teachers.

While some of the men teachers did not embrace a hyper-masculine approach, others did. It was good that there were enough men teachers to present a diversity of approaches, and also important to acknowledge the ways women at the school helped create and reinforce certain images of men. For example, the principal wanted the men to take a more active leadership role at the school. She encouraged them to form a “Men Only” group and had the male assistant principal exhort them to be leaders. It is true that women did the bulk of committee work as well as organizing special events for the families. Perhaps Ms. Wilson’s push to the men was to create more of a

³⁶ The year after this study ended, a new principal (also an African American woman), came to Clark Elementary. She took a very different approach, and required all teachers to have their certificates. All but one of the African American men teachers from the year before were not working at Clark under the new principal.

balanced workload. Yet it was strange to me that the principal wanted these men teachers, most of whom did not have teaching certificates or much experience, to be leaders at the school, in place of the many competent, experienced women teachers. Some other idea, such as that men “should” be leaders seemed to underlie her actions. This is important to analyze because it may be an example of an African American institution serving as a “location of transmitting controlling images” (Collins, 1991). In other words, it is not only white institutions which limit and control ideas about women, but African American run institutions which can also perpetuate sexism.

This concern about gender roles was not expressed by teachers or administrators. Only one white ESL specialist mentioned that the gender divisions between boys and girls seemed a bit on the excessive side. Perhaps race supercedes gender in the minds of most teachers at Clark. In other words, it was more important that they have an African American staff who can teach the students to be proud about their heritage, and to have the tools to make it in the white world. The gender divisions between boys and girls were very striking to me, probably because they were so different from my own experiences in elementary school. For example, at Clark students lined up in girl and boy lines without fail. Never once in three years did I observe students lining up by tables (which were mixed), or by birthdays, or some other grouping. There was also discussion by some teachers about how they taught the girls to “take care of the boys” and let the boys do things like open the door for them. In addition, the ideas about men teachers being better able to “get through

to” boys served to reinforce a message that it is acceptable for boys to reject the authority of women teachers.

It is also important to note the participation of women in perpetuating this division between men’s and women’s roles. We see examples of women teachers promoting a certain version of what it means to be a “man teacher” which included ideas about discipline; we also see the woman principal actively encouraging the men to separate themselves into an exclusive group. She also gave them preferential treatment, especially related to hiring.

It is not advised to simply inject men into a setting without taking time to examine the kinds of gender messages you want to convey (Roulston, 2000). Clark welcomed men teachers into the school in part to create a sort of “domesticity”. This can be seen especially in the creation of an alternate family with mother and father roles. Despite this, there are still aspects of “domophobia” (Martin, 1992).

Domophobia is the rejection or devaluation of the roles of women and girls. Merely incorporating men into the school building does not automatically represent a dismantling of women as ruling the domestic sphere. If the male teachers rely on (and women teachers support and encourage) various hegemonic variations of presenting their masculinity, the same rejection of the domestic sphere can result, but perhaps even worse as boys and girls both are receiving the message of divided spheres within the school building.

Despite this critique, it is crucial to consider the participation of men teachers within the larger societal context. While I point out some problems with an uncritical

insertion of African American men into elementary schools, I do not mean to negate the contributions of such an approach. With the alarming statistics of incarceration for African American men, having men teachers provides an alternative view of African American men and their masculinity. At Clark, with multiple African American men, students were able to see a diversity of masculinities. While the hyper-masculine approach existed in one or two teachers, there were also African American men who described themselves as “softies”. All of these men talked about the importance of caring for their students and demonstrated that care by being teachers of young children, something rather unique for men in general, and African American men in particular.

Clark Elementary provided an opportunity to delve into the complexity of how a school responds to the needs of its community. The predominately African American staff and student body, and the unique concentration of African American men teachers, allowed an exploration of the diversity of views within the African American community, taking into account both social class and gender. This dissertation began with a question about how to educate the children who are being left behind. Clark Elementary provided some pieces of an answer, but also left behind many question to be considered in the attempt to care for and educate all children.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Epilogue

Case studies allow for in-depth exploration of a particular social setting during a specific time. It turned out that my observations from 2000-2002 were the end of a chapter at Clark Elementary. About six months after I visited the school for the last time in 2002, I received an email from a colleague who lived in the City where Clark was located. She had seen a story on the local news about the school board's decision to fire the principal and thought I would be interested in this development.

I called the school the next day and asked who the principal was. Sure enough, it was not Ms. Wilson. Surprised and curious, I contacted a teacher with whom I had developed a good relationship. She filled me in on the events leading up to the firing. The principal was removed by the school board because she committed a breach of ethics related to nepotism. A relative of hers had a business and she invited him to make a presentation soliciting participation at a required teacher meeting. A couple of the teachers were upset about this and called the district office to report the incident. According to the district's policies, the principal could be terminated for her actions.

Many teachers and parents at Clark were very upset and interpreted the school board's actions as an over-reaction. While the school board was within its legal right to fire the principal, they only gave a reprimand to another administrator from Clark who was also connected (via relatives) to the same business venture. That administrator was allowed to keep her job and remain at Clark. On the day of the

school board meeting, parents and teachers packed the meeting hall – so many that there was an overflow crowd. The school board had anticipated a large crowd and had hired several off-duty police to provide security at the event, which some of the teachers and parents found offensive. In addition, the discussion related to Ms. Wilson was placed last on the agenda, which meant that the teachers and parents had to wait at least two hours before their concerns were heard. Since teachers were not allowed to speak due to school board policy, several parents made impassioned speeches about how important Ms. Wilson was to the school. Despite their pleas, the school board decided to terminate Ms. Wilson effective immediately.

The principal interpreted her dismissal as the school board seeing an opportunity to get rid of her. In addition to her periodic friction with “the Greene way”, Ms. Wilson directly challenged the district leadership the previous year. The district was selecting a new superintendent, and instead of performing a national search, posted an announcement that applications would be accepted only for a very short time, and only from within the district. It was clear to Ms. Wilson that they had already unofficially selected the next superintendent. Ms. Wilson applied for the position and in an open letter to the school board (which she also showed to me), made the point that the superintendent-to-be had very little classroom experience. She also alleged that students “on the wrong side” of Greene ISD, the minority students, were not getting equal treatment. She also offered to withdraw her application should the district decide to pursue a national search. In what sounded in retrospect like prophecy, she prefaced her statement to the school board with “I may

be committing political suicide.” While there is no question her actions with the teacher meeting constituted a breach of the ethical code, Ms. Wilson and others questioned her termination and suspected it was a convenient way to remove her.

Another African American woman principal was sent to Clark to fill the vacant position. One change the new principal implemented was requiring teachers to be certified, which resulted in most of the African American men teachers not returning the following year. Several of the most experienced staff, some who had come to Clark at the beginning with Ms. Wilson, and some who were near retirement, also left Clark at the end of the year.

Other changes also occurred that would shape Clark Elementary. Greene ISD decided that Clark should become a bilingual campus. This meant that more of the Spanish-speaking children in the immediate area whose parents desired bilingual education could attend Clark, instead of having to go to a school farther away. The result was a student body with far more Latinos. Figures provided to me from the registrar at Clark in March 2004 reflect a student body which was 59% African American and 40% Latino/a, a large change from the 84% African American and 14% Latino/a students during the study period. In addition, the school reform money had run out and many of the programs implemented during the 2000-2002 period had not been continued. Within a year, Clark Elementary, through a combination of unexpected events and district policies, had become a very different place from the school that existed during my study.

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