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Community Insurgency: Constituency, School Choice, and the Common Good

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Abstract

This study explores the ways in which the democratic notion of “the people” may be enacted in the school choice arena. Through an investigation of a charter school movement in a rural and segregated district in the Deep South, we explore themes of the constituent paradox that enabled the community to move beyond individual interests towards an expression of the common good. It is argued that for “the people” to be invoked via the democratic claim, they must identify more deeply than the institutions of their representation and recognize an expanded form of individualism defined through participation over consumption.

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IN RECENT YEARS, support for school choice has taken on an increasingly populist narrative, emphasizing choice as an expression of the grassroots community against an ineffective and monopolistic public-school institution (Ertas, 2015; Schwalbach, 2019a; Wagner, 2020b). Despite this rhetorical emphasis on liberating the public toward more democratic ideals (Wells et al., 2002), research on these grassroots communities has often revealed self-interest as a main factor of mobilization, calling into question the representative capability of the charter movement and its commitment to the common good (Angus, 2015; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Holmes Erickson, 2017; Makris, 2018; Shuls, 2018). Indeed, charter support has been seen as both a voice of—and resistant to—the greater public (Lubienski, 2001; Moe, 2001). In this theoretical paper, we seek to explore this paradox underlying charter constituencies and ask in what capacity the charter movement can truly embody the people’s will beyond limitations of self-interest and social class. In short, if possible, when can a school choice movement be the voice for the common good as promised?

To explore this point, we use the example of a charter school movement in a small, rural, and segregated district in the Deep South. This charter came to channel a coalition of parents and community members who sought to resist “the way things are done,”—acting to integrate a district long segregated by race and class (Mann et al., 2019). However, we do not use this setting as a case study nor as an attempt to conclusively answer our research question. Rather, we use it as a template from which to explore broader theoretical implications at the intersection on choice, individualism, and public identity. To do so, we draw comparisons between community mobilization and broader political theories on constituent foundations. We make the argument that this charter movement was able to embody motives beyond self-interest toward an expression of the *vox populi*, offering an instance of *higher lawmaking* centered around community benefit (Ackerman, 1993). Using in-depth interviews and historical documents, we use this case to exemplify a process of community identity, mobilization, and power construction that frame choice as an instrument of either division or unification. We recognize that for school choice to be an instrument of the common good, it must be enacted by a public that exists more deeply than the institutions of their representation and be an expression of participatory individuality rather than a private exercise of consumption.

We begin this argument by examining the disconnect between the political rhetoric of school choice and the espoused motivations of parents to note that grassroots support for school choice has often fallen short of broader ideals, frequently acting to engender community divisions rather than alleviate them. Next, we explore an example of a charter movement that we believe genuinely mobilized around a desire to improve the common good. Then, using this example, we identify factors and trends that enabled this constituency to employ such higher lawmaking beyond pure self-interest. We claim that this *community*

insurgency: (a) was unified by resistance to a historical narrative beyond the educational institution itself; (b) required a “foreign” power structure for the community to self-invoke these desires; and (c) could only enact higher lawmaking toward the common good through deep identification with leadership “of the people.” We conclude by exploring what these factors mean for the concept of choice as a road to democratic expression and popular will, as well as the potential for school choice to actually speak for the democratic public it claims to be part of.

The Political Rhetoric of School Choice

The political narrative surrounding charter schools has a complex history standing at a crossroads between democracy, liberty, free markets, and concepts of the public good (Apple, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 2011; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Wells et al., 2002). Recently, under the generally pro-school-choice stance of the Trump administration (Jackson, 2020; Mark, 2016), a strain of school choice ideology has come to echo many of the hallmarks of populism (Mudde, 2004),¹ namely a distrust of the centralization of public education alongside a notion that school choice is more of the people—local, democratic, and market-driven (Angus, 2015; Coons, 2000; Ertas, 2015; Henig, 2010; Jason, 2017; Kirst, 2007; Potterton, 2020; Wells et al., 2002).² To speak in broad strokes, on one hand, charter schools have been seen as a means to give the disenfranchised a voice against a history of failed public-school reforms (Kirst, 2007; Maranto, 2017; Moe, 2001; Schwalbach, 2019a; Wagner, 2020b), while on the other they are seen as a neoliberal attack on public education that will further disenfranchise historically marginalized groups (Ertas, 2015; Kirst, 2007; Maranto, 2017; Molnar, 1996; Wells et al., 2002). These narratives underlying the charter debate recognize a central tension of concepts within the notion of what constitutes the people to be represented, split between an individualized concept of liberty and a collective concept of group equality (Apple, 2005; Lindblom, 1977).

As argued by Lubienski (2001), the choice movement has enfolded these tensions by redefining what is meant by the people to be represented by schools—thinning them from the collective concept of the people-as-citizens towards one of defining the people-as-consumers. In this sense, the representative claims of the charter movement are democratic insofar as the demos are reframed as a multitude of self-interested individuals (Apple, 2001, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 2011; Lubienski, 2001; Shuls, 2018). As noted by Michael Apple, “Consumer choice is the guarantor of

1 Populism, classically defined, involves (a) being people centered and anti-elite, (b) a Manichean relation between the pure people and corrupt elite, and (c) the expression of the general will of the people (Geurkink et al., 2020; Mudde, 2004).

2 We focus on constituent issues and a contemporary strain of rhetoric to maintain scope but recognize this is not an encompassing frame for school choice. This is only one interpretation of a host of complex ideologies involved in school choice, which are also wrapped up in political, racial, and socioeconomic narratives. For more topical examples, we direct the reader to school-choice advocacy groups such as the Fordham Institute (Griffith, 2019; Petrilli & Northern, 2019) and EdChoice (Wagner, 2020a, 2020b).

democracy. In effect, education is seen as simply one more product like bread, cars, and television” (2005, p. 215). This notion subverts the fundamental notion that education should be a public good that is to confer indirect and collective benefits, such as a stable and cohesive society, equality of opportunity, and economies of scale that enable equitable benefits to under-resourced populations (Cuban & Shipps, 2000; Lubienski, 2000; McNeil, 2002).

In redefining the people as individual consumers, choice rhetoric identifies new concepts of inclusion and exclusion. First, the choice movement emphasizes a common identity based around equality of choice opportunity, rather than equality of educational opportunity (Ball, 2003; Lubienski, 2001; Reay & Ball, 1997). This form of equality claims to speak for the people across lines of race and class, ostensibly offering a new form of inclusion for the disenfranchised by defining choice as the great social lever. As recently argued by a charter advocacy group, “Parents—not big government—choose the school that best fits their children’s needs. Charter schools empower parents and give many children from low-income families opportunities that they could not otherwise afford” (Schwalbach, 2019b). Second, the perceived failure of public schools is often located in public institutions that do not offer this individual choice opportunity. Those public elements that restrict individual choice as a means to endorse unified behaviors and maximize economies of scale—including teacher unions, district bureaucracy, and state regulations—are noted for their inability to engage with consumerist freedom (Angus, 2015; Apple, 2006; Blissett, 2017; Chubb & Moe, 2011). As recently noted by the generally pro-charter Fordham Institute: “Critics will continue to oppose charter schools because their opposition has always been based on bread and butter interests, like the bargaining power of teachers unions, rather than evidence or reason” (Petrilli & Northern, 2019).

The choice movement has thereby sought to legitimize charters as a *vox populi*, that is at once an expression of consumerist public will and in opposition to that which is public. “The fundamental point to be made about parents and students is not that they are politically weak but that, even in a perfectly functioning democratic system, the public schools are not meant to be theirs to control and are literally not supposed to provide them with the kind of education they want” (Chubb & Moe, 2011, p. 32). Through this, the voice of the people is authorized via an act of self-interest and, as such, will neither desire—nor be able to—support educational practices aimed at higher lawmaking for the common good (Ackerman, 1993; Apple, 2001, 2005; Ball, 1993; Cuban & Shipps, 2000).

Mobilization of Charter Support

While contemporary political rhetoric surrounding charter support has often made a populist, liberal claim to invoke the will of the people, research has shown that on-the-ground support for charters does indeed follow the people-as-consumer model, mainly supporting parental choice to provide specific benefits to their own children (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Shuls, 2018). Whereas some studies have noted explicit emphasis among some parents to pursue choice as a means to imbue collective benefits

such as diversity and democratic principles (Pedroni, 2006; Roda, 2018), specific dimensions such as academics, special programs, and safety have generally shown to be primary motivations (Holmes Erickson, 2017; Kleitz et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2000; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Although narratives of liberty-through-choice and resistance to public institutions do emerge, the notion of a common good is not always present, as parents often act in self-interest at the expense of aggregate goods (Shuls, 2018).

Furthermore, the underpinnings of choice support have shown to be divided along lines of race and class. In districts that have underserved historically disadvantaged populations, grassroots support has often invoked a sense of opposition to failed policies of traditional public schools. Citing poor material conditions, as well as misaligned curricular and policy positions, historically marginalized parental coalitions have sought choice as a means of escaping dire outlooks to find improved opportunities for their children (Allen, 2017; Dougherty, 2004; Pedroni, 2006; Stulberg, 2015). However, for middle-class and white parents, charter support is generally less about rebellion and more about competition and deregulation (Ball, 2003; Wells et al., 2002). Echoing a consumerist model built on gaining competitive advantage (Feuerstein, 2015; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Roda, 2018), parents of privilege deploy political leverage, access to information, and networks to game the system in a manner that evokes individualistic rather than community goals (Roda, 2018). Here, parental mobilization specifically undercuts those equalizing aspects of choice claimed by broader charter rhetoric, seeking to maintain privileged divisions by race and class. In short, when it comes to school choice, “parents’ private interests trumped their commitments to the public and collective good” (Posey-Maddox, 2016, p. 179).

This is not to say that charter parents never seek the greater common good through choice nor that public school parents are exclusively interested in the common good.³ There is a long-standing body of literature on higher ideals of equality, diversity, democracy, and civic good as being explicitly pursued by grassroots choice supporters. These ideals have shown to be deeply held personal beliefs and expressions of parent’s own identities (Angus, 2015; Wilkins, 2010, 2011; Windle & Stratton, 2013). Invocations for these collective goods thereby recognize that such goals are personal decisions within a space of self-interested choice. Parents claim ideals of the common benefit as a property of individuality, rather than common benefits being a property of the choice community itself (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Shuls, 2018).

It thereby stands to be recognized that the charter community is often stratified into separate constituencies pursuing divergent goals, resulting in strange bedfellows that support a single path to different ends. Despite the broader rhetoric of equalizing the people through choice, research has shown that choice often results

3 It is worthwhile noting that parents of privilege whose children already attend satisfactory schools often lack an incentive to disrupt a “hidden” system of choice driven by real estate markets and catchment zones (Marshall, 2017); this, too, is a type of individual interest-driven choice.

in a balkanized public left with a reduced sense of the common good. As noted by Makris (2018), pro-charter parents have agreed that school choice “does not bring the community together” (p. 423) and undermines broader connections across these lines of race and class. In fact, it often draws new divisions at the level of personal identity, leading to polarized interpersonal relations in spaces where such divisions did not formerly exist (Makris, 2018; Maranto, 2017).

It is in this sense that we ask to what extent the charter grassroots can truly invoke the people’s will beyond limitations of self-interest and social class. More broadly, we ask, “Under what conditions can school choice embody the ideal of a true grassroots expression of the common good?” In doing so, we subsequently ask, “What properties allow this community to self-invoke claims to the people being while resistant that which is public?”

Riverside Schools Movement

To bring these issues to light, we explore the emergence of a charter school and its supporters in a small, rural, and historically segregated district in the Deep South. We believe this charter movement genuinely expressed the people’s will and carried out a program to improve the common good of the community. It is intended to be an extreme case selection to exemplify the extent to which history, power, and culture form community articulation and resistance. Here, context is important. We collected public documents and news stories related to the district at focus, exploring archives of Black newspapers from the region as well as conducting ProQuest and media searches regarding public schooling in the county, the charter school, other local stories of parents, school policy, and more. We classified and aggregated 25 relevant news stories, one dissertation, and a book relating to the history of schooling in the area. We then interviewed 15 parents, 2 administrators, and 15 teachers from the school, using a semi-structured interview protocol. We asked questions regarding their opinions on the charter school, why they supported it (or not), and how they thought it impacted the community.⁴ Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and an hour. We intention-ally focused on those who were involved with the school to gain a sense of how notions of identity, context, and the common good were perceived by the charter community of the town. Through this, we each coded transcripts and documents and triangulated themes to get a sense of these ideas in their context, as well as the broader frameworks that were operating.

4 We solicited participants through a general call to all charter school parents as well as all teachers via email announcement. Due to the nature of the call, there is potential for self-selection bias, and this sample may not fully reflect the general population of the charter supporting constituency. However, since they were willing to conduct a discussion on the nature of the school, it may be assumed that these participants were more actively engaged in its development, which is the sample that we believe is the most beneficial to this study. The demographic breakdown of the sample is: 7 Black (47%) and 8 white (53%) parents, 5 Black (33%) and 10 white (67%) teachers, and 2 White (100%) administrators.

Setting

The town of Riverside (a pseudonym) is a small, rural town in the Deep South, with a population that is roughly two-thirds Black and one-third white. The schools and a local university are the major employers, and roughly half of the population lives below the poverty line. In the late 1960s, 12 Black students sought to integrate the exclusively white public high school in Riverside. Upon arrival, they were met with threats of violence and racial epithets. Soon after, white members of the community opened a segregation academy, a private school that almost exclusively enrolled white students. This academy had the explicit and intentional purpose to keep the town separated by race, as signaled by the governor and financial support documents of the time. Riverside’s public schools enrolled nearly all Black students, while the private school was white. Roughly 50 years later, in 2017, the private school closed, and white parents were suddenly forced to reassess where their children would go to school. Many chose to enroll their students in neighboring districts, maintaining the segregated nature of the schools.

Soon after, a law authorizing charter school development was passed, and the nearby university drew from Riverside stakeholders to propose a new school. However, rather than plan to replace the segregation academy, the university and community sought to intentionally develop an integrated and diverse school. Through discussions and collaboration sessions with local families, leaders, and other stakeholders, the university was able to develop plans for a lab school with a diverse curriculum. This school would engage local experts and university faculty, as well as employ a deliberately integrated board. This board refused offers from outside entities to develop the school, instead using the university-community partnership to authorize and run the school. Given the history and identity of the area, the opening of the school gained national attention and media coverage, seeking to undo five decades of racial segregation-by-tradition. With enrollment that closely matches the demographics of the town, the school has served as a counter narrative to public opinion on schooling—and community identity—in the Deep South.

The national attention, and surprise, of this school thereby suggests a subtle but ultimately more perplexing question: After 50 years of segregation, how did Riverside break with its own past? Instead of replacing the private school with a similarly designed charter school, the community ostensibly undid its own tradition of segregation toward a new model of what education is to be. Such a relocation of public identity gets to a central question of democratic constitution, namely, that a people cannot be the authors of their own foundation (Galligan, 2008; Loughlin & Walker, 2007). As noted by Honig (2009), “The people must be equal under the law and therefore cannot receive it from any one of their own” (p. 4). How is it that the people at once enforce their own rules and seek to resist them in the name of the public will?

Approach

We ask these questions not to solve them in the empirical sense. They may not be solvable in a manner that can close the issue or generalize

beyond the idiosyncrasies of context. Rather, we ask these questions to deal with them symbolically—to inform rather than resolve (Honig, 2009). Indeed, the paradox of constituent power, the general framework through which we view this setting, remains exactly that, a paradox (e.g., Ankersmit, 1996; Frank, 2010; Galligan, 2008; Lindsay, 2017; Loughlin & Walker, 2007). We therefore seek to engage this paradox as a site of knowledge production, recognizing the limits of drawing generalities from a specific and unique context. As a result, the following discussion changes registers between abstract theoretical ideals and practical examples to engage these two discourses in an instructive manner, maintaining scope on the internal politics of the Riverside charter community as they relate to broader concepts of choice, democracy, and collective identity. Following, we explore three themes determinative of what we consider an authentic community insurgency: the *unifying enemy* by which the community was delimited, the legitimizing body that authorized the community to invoke, and the leadership that enacted the higher lawmaking of insurgent will.

Theme 1: History as Unifying Enemy

As argued in 1928 by Carl Schmitt in his seminal work, *Constitutional Theory*, the generation of a set of rules defining the public requires that the people have an identity that precedes any formal order. This identity rests on not only the commonalities that link but the enemies that form the boundaries of group membership. An act of democratic community, therefore, requires an equality of expression for those who are inside the group (Schmitt, 2008, p. 257–264), largely united by a consensus on who the enemies are (p. 264–267). Following this distinction, the contemporary populist strain in school choice has, as noted, emphasized the failings of the public institution as the site of the enemy, claiming its inability to provide the consumerist construction of choice-as-equality (Apple, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 2011). Yet, in Riverside, we found little evidence of this notion, with parents largely indifferent to the public-ness of the public schools: “Didn’t know the difference in them. Just that they existed. That’s all.” While many community members were clearly unhappy with the performance of the local public schools, they often simultaneously stated that they didn’t like the idea of charter schools as such, even though they chose to support this specific one.

Rather, we found the unifying enemy to be the perceived narrative of the town itself. One parent said:

And this is an opportunity for us to show, and we have, I think, shown not just the state but the whole country that we are not these backwoods redneck hicks. We are intelligent people, and we have come together as a community and blazed a trail for ourselves.

Here, resistance was not presented as a struggle against the problems of the current system but rather the problems of—as one parent noted—“the way things are done.” While this way was embodied in the public schools, it was less about the public schools in themselves and more what they represented.⁵ Conversations

5 As one parent noted: “I don’t like the idea that we’re taking money from local public schools. I think, although I’m participating in the

centered around the undertone of past segregation, noting the hegemony surrounding the system of the racial divide, as well as the uncomfortable mark of both participating in segregation and resisting it.

LISA (WHITE PARENT):⁶ To be honest, our community really needed this school, because, I mean, it was so segregated before the school—

COURTNEY (BLACK PARENT): And it wasn’t our generation that segregated it.

JAMIE (WHITE PARENT): It’s an inherited segregation. You know, like [Lisa] said, the public school is all Black. Well, I won’t send my little child there and let him be the only . . . I mean, it just wasn’t something one person could do.

COURTNEY (BLACK PARENT): And it’s not, and the thing I want to make clear from what I’ve noticed is it’s not a dislike or it’s not a racial thing. It’s just segregated. You know what I’m saying? It’s like, everybody gets along, but it’s just the fear of, well, “I don’t know those people.” That kind of thing, you know?

Here, one parent brings up the guinea-pig problem of integration perceptions (Makris, 2018), recognizing that historical segregation is often viewed as a gridlock of collective action wherein no parent wants to be the first actor (Shuls, 2018). Nor is it claimed to necessarily be about active prejudice. However, there was anxiety about the ability for the community to separate from itself in this process: “If it’s still driven . . . if it’s still led by local people, how are they not going to fall back into or be influenced by previous mindsets?” The enemy, as described here, is thereby neither formal power nor deliberate intention.⁷ Rather, it is a pattern of collective participation of the people themselves that is to be unified against, as an artifact of prior generations. As one parent noted: “I’ll see representations in Hollywood movies of the South, and I think, that is so outdated; that is so not us.” The exclusionary principle is not so much against the public schools as institutions but the inherited narrative these schools were symbolic of and participated in. A parent explained, “I think a lot of people wanted it. I think some people may be afraid to voice it. But a lot of them are stuck in their old ways. Like all this tradition.”

Theme 2: University as Foreigner

As one parent noted, “I think this community was begging for families to come together.” If there was a will to come together and resist the way things were done, what gave voice to this suppressed

charter school . . . ideally this school should be integrated back into the public schools. That’s what our system is set up to do.”

6 All names are pseudonyms.

7 We, the researchers, recognize our positionality as three white males and one Black male and as researchers from recognized universities. Although similar themes emerged across focus groups, we acknowledge that this may have resulted in responses influenced by our presence or perceptions of social desirability (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

desire? This question gets at the heart of community expression, namely the *founding paradox* of democratic will, whereby the people cannot found themselves (see: Agné, 2010; Honig, 2009; Lindsay, 2017; Rousseau, 1762/2002).⁸ We explore what initiated this community to come together in a manner that allowed for a shift from a collection of desires to a formalized expression of the public will.

Drawing from interviews and materials, it was clear what authorized the community to act, and it was not the community itself—nor was it the public schools. As noted, Riverside was partially held in the guinea-pig problem of breaking the gridlock, both recognizing the potential of desire but requiring a guarantee of simultaneous action. As one parent noted: “So there was a sense of, there was sort of a critical mass, right? Like, enough people to where you wouldn’t be the only person doing it.” When asked about what finally allowed for this critical mass, community members were clear: “Parents chose this school just knowing how the university is backing it. For that sole purpose, I feel like the parents would choose this school. Because they have 100% backing from the university.”

More than providing the window for invocation of the critical mass, the university provided the legitimacy for the community to move outside of the architecture of its own parameters. One teacher chose to apply for a position “knowing that there are resources outside the schools, there’s this other sort of structure, other support mechanism that’s there.” Here, we contend that the university acted as what Bonnie Honig (2010) called “the foreigner”—an external power that can at once delimitate the people and be independent of them. “A foreign-founders foreignness secures for him the distance and impartiality needed to animate and guarantee a General Will that can neither animate nor guarantee itself” (p. 21). More than its institutional externality to the way things were done, the university simultaneously held the trust of community members, with one noting: “One of the things for me was that the university was backing it. I went to college there, so I knew everything about it . . . but it wasn’t part of that ‘culture’ [of segregation].” This position gave the local university the impartial authority of a foreign founder that, as suggested by Rousseau, “saw all of men’s passions yet experienced none of them; who had no relationship at all to our nature yet knew it thoroughly: whose happiness was independent of us, yet who was nevertheless willing to attend to ours” (1762/2002, Book II, Ch 7). Indeed, the community rejected offers from other outside charter agencies,

8 Rousseau (1762/2002) brought the *founding problem* to the front: “For an emerging people to be capable of appreciating the sound maxims of politics and to follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause. The social spirit which ought to be the work of that institution, would have to preside over the institution itself. And men would be, prior to the advent of laws, what they ought to become by means of laws” (Book II, Chapter 7, p. 164). It may subsequently explained: “Since democracy means rule by the people, and there can be no democracy prior to the delimitation of the people; and since there can be no democracy prior to the delimitation of a people, the delimitation of the people cannot itself be democratically decided” (Agné, 2010, p. 328).

deciding instead on one whose interests were deemed both interested and impartial, who would be aligned with the public yet outside of them.

The presence of this foreigner entity permits a public act that can escape the founding paradox (Honig, 2009; Näsström, 2007). More than be impartial, the otherness of the foreigner grants a temporary suspension of the rules of the existing order, offering a form of legitimacy to be drawn from as the community invokes its own will (Honig, 2009). If the gridlock of segregation was truly sustained in the inherited momentum of prior generations, the foreignness of the university offered a new start outside of that history—the self-alienation that allows those who have participated in the prior system to disavow it (Descombes, 2016, Chapter 6; Honig, 2009; Kristeva, 1991)

Theme 3: Leadership, Trust, and the Enablement of Higher Lawmaking

We now investigate a final question, on how this movement proceeded toward what has been called higher lawmaking (Ackerman, 1993)—a break with factionalist short-term decision-making toward a long-term common ideal of the greater good. Parents recognized a future of collective benefits that brought them together around common goals of social integration and equal opportunity. Many parents and teachers expressed an idea of being “part of something bigger” that would “heal the county.” Several described it as a “reset button,” noting that this was an opportunity to build a new narrative that would help keep people here and draw new business.

However, the enactment of such higher lawmaking requires a caveat. The community must not only break the ritual order but also extend into an open space to build a new order (Frank, 2010). This way is fraught with risk in the absence of deeper structures (Arendt, 1963). As one teacher noted, “This is a big change, but like I said [. . .] we’re all willing to take that risk.” In doing so, each participant exposes themselves to risk and uncertainty of exceeding the existing power arrangement. As one parent noted, “We’ve invested our future into this charter school. And because my future is invested in this charter school, it cannot fail.” As another noted, “We all have skin in the game now.”

What then enabled parents to take on such risk? One theme came up repeatedly: trust in the leadership and the process of enacting voice. The director of the school, Dr. Terrill, was highly familiar with the community and was a faculty member at the university.

MEREDITH (WHITE PARENT): And so the top is Dr. Terrill, and I’ve known her my entire life. We went to high school together. I said, so, if Dr. Terrill’s going to build it . . .

LEONARD (WHITE PARENT): People will come.

CAROLYN (BLACK PARENT): It’s the Field of Dreams in this building right here. I know her as a person and as a professional, and she’s not going to fail. I had that confidence in the leadership going in.

In another exchange:

AMANDA (BLACK PARENT): It really boils down to the leaders. I mean, if they're willing to step in and help make the change, and then like she said about our head of school, Dr. Terrill, she has a very driven personality, and if it hadn't been for her pushing this, who knows? But I think it could work definitely, but it's got to have the right community leaders.

KEVIN (WHITE PARENT): She caught the brunt of every single misconception. She defended us night and day. And I think we all kind of watched her do that. Are thankful that she did.

Here, Dr. Terrill also held the double inscription—as both one of the community by experience and the foreigner by institutional position. This dual position of community insider and institutional outsider in many ways encapsulated the paradoxes of a community identity wrestling with itself—both participating in and resisting tradition.

In this space, many parents expressed a sense of comfort even as they suspended judgment on the schools—recognizing that their trust in leadership enabled them to undertake the experiment. One said, “We, at home, joke, my husband and I, about how we're all part of this big experiment. And it's exciting, and I think everybody here feels the excitement. I think we're all proud to be part of it.” Here, this trust allowed for the “ongoing condition of possibility” that can bring about community consensus (Frank, 2010, p. 5).

OSCAR (WHITE PARENT): In the beginning, there was lot of turmoil surrounding this school, and a lot of people that really got for it, and a lot of people really against it. And I liked that the board, and Dr. Terrill . . . They had town meetings, they had open meetings [. . .] It was very . . . they listened, they cared what we said.

CARMEN (BLACK PARENT): That, to me, is, like, leadership. It's from the top all the way down

MELINDA (BLACK PARENT): Yeah, so . . . when I came to meetings, hey, I was up for whatever. And that's the truth. I come to support my child, but I'm up for whatever these teachers got to throw at me. That's how I came in.

Whereas the community had rejected plans from other established charter schools to open, parents were only willing to bear the risk of breaking with the past to support the higher lawmaking when the leader was—or had been—one of their own.

Discussion and Conclusion

Here, we have used the example of a charter constituency to exemplify how the people may mobilize for charters in a manner aimed at the common good. We have argued that, in contrast to the populist rhetoric of uniting around choice and opposition to public institutions, the community had to coalesce around a unifying enemy that was of the community itself. As such, the authentic exercise for the common good to be sought must be exactly that, common. Next, we found that for the community to break from the

way things were done toward such common ideas, it had to resolve its foundational paradox by employing an external legitimating power. Here, the university served as the communities' foreign foundation, enabling a suspension of the existing power structure so that an emergent *vox populi* could be articulated. Finally, we argue that for this community to move toward the enactment of higher lawmaking, it required a leader of the people to entrust the uncertainties of a new social order. We use this story to illustrate the possibility of a subtle shift in the school choice rhetoric—that the public identity may exist more deeply than the institutions of its representation (Arendt, 1963; Descombes, 2016, Chapter 6; Lindsay, 2017; Rousseau, 1762/2002). When we allow the public to articulate choice, rather than choice to articulate the public, charter school mobilization can be an expression of the common good rather than of self-interest (Lubienski, 2001).

Yet, as noted by Tocqueville (2003), “peoples always bear some marks of their origin” (p. 31). We ask what marks will be carried along from this foundation and recognize three points of concern as the community moves forward. First, as “the way things are done” was part of the local culture itself, this separation from history is likely to create an excess of its own. Parents expressed concern with the “townies,” not only in the sense of resistance to the school but that a new division was created in the community, which may lead to new forms of separation. “It's very sensitive in this community,” noted one parent, while others expressed concerns for social backlash in the future: “I'm worried that they may still try to do things like have separate social events.”

Second, the community required a foreign institution to represent them, which, by definition, will never allow them to fully own their representation nor their claim to a new narrative of the public (Frank, 2010). It will be unclear if the story of this community will be seen as one of a local movement or a university movement—one that drew from the authority of a common public identity or one that was instituted by an outside agency. Indeed, in Rousseau's account of the foreign lawmaker (1762/2002), it was required that the lawmaker leaves after the foundation to allow for this claim.

Third, this formation brings into question the boundaries of externality for community identity and the possibility of democracy. In many iterations of school choice, the democratic component of developing schools is often absent. Choosing among predetermined options may reflect market principles but is not a democratic act of constructing choice (Wells et al., 2002). Intuitively, Riverside parents resisted the notion of a fully outside charter school: “I would probably be a little more apprehensive with a charter school if it was somebody that owns it from the ‘western’ United States.” However, given the acceptance of choice and its foreignness as an instrument of public expression, it is unclear to what extent future outside choices—such as national charter organizations—will be accepted into this community identity and if options generated from outside the community will transfigure its voice and the possibility of democracy. To this extent, the community must continually negotiate its delimitations of externality in relation to its foundation as new processes of expression are adopted within its boundaries (Honig, 2009)—a

process whereby founding must also be engaged with “the ongoing and enacted pursuit of ‘finding’” (Frank, 2010, p. 253).

We draw these themes to make a final point regarding the enactment of the charter school in Riverside. As noted by Jason Frank (2010), the people must “draw their power from their own unrealized futurity” (p. 6). As an underlying theme throughout this analysis, the common good to be brought forth from the school was based on the potentiality of what education could do for the community. If education represents an engagement with the potential of a society (Cuban & Shippis, 2000; Katz, 1987), parents were acutely aware that this was about identifying with a type of social future that will define their children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). “The only thing I knew was going to happen in this school is that regardless of color, creed, origin, or whatever, all of the children would get an opportunity to have the same opportunity in education. Have the same challenges. Have the same school support. And for that, I am totally for it.”

Here, we suggest a new possible site of democratic equality in school choice—not the act of choosing as an individual and closed possession but the act of choosing as participation in the construction of potential, a shift from the logic of choice-as-purchase to the logic of choice-as-partaking. For this act to occur, we must reimagine the chooser in school choice. As framed in contemporary populist rhetoric previously noted, the individual’s claim to democratic right is satisfied in possessing choice in a vacuum—absent of social dependency. This atomistic *I* exercises their right to choose, and through this process, the collection of individuals is ostensibly represented equally (Lubienski, 2001; Reay & Ball, 1997; Wells et al., 2002). This is the logic whereby the freedom of individual choice leads to short-term self-interest and social factionalism (Apple, 2001; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Molnar, 1996; Potterton, 2020; Shuls, 2018; Wells et al., 2002).

To enact the common good and its potential, the individual *I* requires a reframing of the identity of the chooser from pursuing a closed, independent entity to a socially defined being, whereby “the ‘we’ is not a multiplied ‘I’; it is an ‘I’ expanded” (Descombes, 2016, p. 198). The individual must “define himself by stating what it is, in his eyes, forms part of his identity. But what forms part of his identity is precisely what he is part of” (Descombes, 2016, p. 199). John Dewey recognized this contextualized individuality as a “new individualism” required to enact true democracy (Dewey, 1930). In an expanded definition of individuality itself, individual choice is thereby not an act of extraction from the collection of individuals, but a participatory exercise in the collective of the people (Dewey, 1927). For Dewey, choice was an enactment whereby freedom “is that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others: the power to be an individualized self-making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association” (Dewey, 1927, p. 329). In short, if the chooser’s individuality itself is dependent on the people, then individual choice is an act of the people. One parent noted: “I chose to put my children here [. . .] I knew that this would be the only way this community would embrace Black and whites working together.”

In this sense, the claim to a future of democratic equality and enactment through school choice is precisely the reverse of the individualist consumer choice model proclaimed in populist rhetoric. For school choice to be a popular enactment of the people’s will toward the common good, it must stop claiming choice as a mechanism of distributing individual freedom as a closure of self-interest and claim choice as expressing individual freedom through participation in a common future—the enactment of self as a people that “is forever not . . . yet” (Frank, 2010, p. 5). We close with what one parent passionately expressed: “We chose this school. We didn’t ask for any help. This town is going to grow around this school . . . It’s not segregated by race; it’s not segregated by who has enough money to pay for private school . . . And when they come here and they see how much the kids love it—that’s going to do nothing but make our community better.”

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