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# PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS IN AN AGE OF PRIVATIZATION: THE CONTRADICTION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

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# PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS IN AN AGE OF PRIVATIZATION: THE CONTRADICTION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

By

Tracy Haack

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Title of Thesis: Pedagogical Praxis in an Age of Privatization: the Contradiction of Charter Schools

This thesis by Tracy Haack is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS IN AN AGE OF PRIVATIZATION:

THE CONTRADICTION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

By

Tracy Haack

This study investigates a perceived inconsistency between pedagogical theory and uncritical practice in education, specifically in charter schools. The researcher reflects on the historical creation of charter schools to fulfill the needs of struggling students in contrast to a perception of modern charter schools that are more rigorous or specialized.

The study includes thematically coded interview data from five Midwestern charter school educators in conjunction with site visits including two unspecified charters and two Montessori charters. Educators are asked to describe their evolving teaching philosophies, views on the purposes of education, and identify differences between charter schools and traditional public schools. Three primary themes emerged in educator rhetoric including: 1. instruction of values, 2. language charged by the free-market metaphor, and 3. issues of access for ESL and disabled students. The conclusion posits that homogenous teaching theory can result in uncritical practice and education reforms that do not meet the needs of all students. Thus, not meeting the original vision of charter schools. Themes are analyzed using the critical theory of Louis Althusser who identifies ideological systems and Paulo Freire who discusses the goals of public education as a "democratizing" experience.

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TRACY DANIELLE HAACK

2015

DEDICATION

For Joseph

So many miles later.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Eckert for her constant support and willingness to answer just one more question. I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Monske for reminding me that I just need to articulate a question.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the dedication of the teachers interviewed. I am grateful for you.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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# INTRODUCTION

I teach college composition to students who don't particularly see themselves as college students and certainly not as writers. In many instances, the rigid classroom model does not work for my developmental students. For example, I taught a class composed of numerous first-generation college students with a multitude of self-proclaimed Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder diagnoses. My students were quick to ask for tips about staying focused on the readings, staying committed to their essays after the first page, and staying present during a mini-lesson on MLA formatting. These students struggled against the curriculum in ways I never experienced, always working harder to achieve the same results as their more focused peers. When I created my course schedule, I did not adequately anticipate the needs of these students.

After the semester began, I was forced to throw out the schedule, but I did not see the adjustments made to the course as a teacher or a student failure. Rather, I saw the changes as confirmation that education is a human institution where teachers need to make decisions based on individuals. I also made changes in my content delivery. The same lesson on source inclusion was not working with this fidgety, sleepy, distracted class. It was important to push these students to move around the room, to teach each other, and to work with physical manipulatives. Making these changes, however, came at a cost. Having students teach each other about thesis statements takes longer than having the entire class listen to me talk about thesis statements. As a result, I had to omit some of the schedule to have time to learn fewer things at a greater depth. I knew what material my students needed to master in order to meet our performance objectives. If the time and

energy a teacher puts into planning always yielded the same outcomes, my students should have been learning at an unprecedented rate of intellectual and personal growth. In reality, I discovered an inconsistency between my pedagogical theory and practice. I could not anticipate my students' particular interests and concerns.

As I made these changes, I wondered what happens when a K-12 public school teacher discovers gaps in student knowledge. I questioned what happens when standardized testing and Common Core insist upon the same content in the most efficient timeline because human students need to translate into performance data when standardized testing results are evaluated.

These approaches fail to recognize that education is subject to human responses such as theoretical questioning and constant revisions to our pedagogical practice. Testing and standards are attempts to be objective when education is fundamentally a subjective experience that requires criticality.

At the same time, I was taking a Critical Theory course where I was introduced to the texts of Paulo Freire, and I began to see education in terms of "banking instruction" and ideology. Freire is a proponent of education as a democratizing experience. He taught laborers how to read. He believed the strength of our character is in our practice rather than just our theory. This thinking extended to his political and pedagogical position as well. He says, "It is truly difficult to make a democracy. Democracy, like any dream, is not made with spiritual words but with reflection and practice. It is not what I say that says I am democrat, that I am not racist or machista, but what I do. What I say must not be contradicted by what I do" (67). Freire specifically meant that his pedagogy could not

contradict theory. An idea that I saw again and again during my time with charter school teachers.

Theory helped me articulate a problem with our education system: an achievement gap exists, and we try to remedy it by industrializing education with standardization and convergent thinking. However, I was frustrated when theory didn't offer a solution to this problem. There were always questions and no practical solutions for creative pedagogy that supports divergent thinking. In other words, I was negotiating praxis: the cycle of theory and its practical application. I realized theory was only half of the question. I needed to find theory in practice, and so I began to look for alternative schooling methodology that put theory to real use. I was looking for Freirean pedagogy in action.

I was not looking for charters schools then, but my first internet searches resulted in a series of charter programs that promised a variety of alternative educational goals. They appeared progressive because a separation seems to exist between what I call traditional public schooling and the idea of charter schools as lab schools, open to the trial of new and reflective pedagogies.

I was idealistic when I contacted the first charter program. I was excited to observe experiential pedagogy. While my students were grudgingly taking a required composition course, I was determined to see intrinsically motivated students. I wanted to witness teachers that valued their pedagogical identity and who were able to design and redesign their classrooms to meet student needs. I wanted all of these things, but I knew nothing of the challenges or regulations involved in offering educational choice.

# CHAPTER ONE: INVENTING THE MODERN CHARTER SCHOOL

Public charter schools began trying to find a solution to the achievement gap I saw in my classroom over 25 years ago when the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, proposed that teachers should be allowed to make decisions about curriculum and instruction in order to make the best possible choices for their students. In his 1988 address, Shanker says that current education standards are only successful for students who would already succeed, students "who are able to learn in a traditional system, who are able to sit still, who are able to keep quiet, who are able to remember after they listen to someone else talk for five hours, who are able to pick up a book and learn from it—who've got all these things going for them" (6).

Shanker's opinion was seconded, and with the help of Reichgott Jung, Ted Kolderie, and the Citizens League, he outlined the creation of what would become: charter schools. Their design addressed experimentation, teacher autonomy, and racial integration. The authors of "Restoring Shanker's Vision for Charter Schools" explain:

> 1. This new type of school should be allowed to experiment with desperately needed new approaches to reach students, approaches from which the traditional public schools could learn.
>
> 2. Charter schools would provide an enhanced level of teacher voice and teacher empowerment compared with the public schools, which saw large levels of teacher frustration and turnover.
>
> 3. Charters, by severing the tie between residential neighborhood segregation and school segregation, might help reinvent the old idea of the American common school, where students of different races, incomes, and religions could come and learn together under a single school roof. (qtd. in Kahlenberg and Potter 9)

Although Shanker later revoked his support of charter schools as they were being implemented, the first charter schools were designed for the students who didn't have "all these things going for them" (Shanker 6). The schools were created with the goal of furthering desegregation and giving more power to teachers with innovative ideas. The first of these schools opened in Minnesota in 1991. Over the next 25 years, "6,400 charters in 42 states and the District of Columbia" would open (Kahlenberg and Potter 9).

Charter schools were designed to be an alternative classroom for struggling students. The theory was there. In practice, however, the schools were not meeting Shanker's vision. According to educational historian and former-Assistant Secretary of Education, Diane Ravitch, charter schools

> were supposed to help solve some of the hardest problems of public education. As originally imagined, charters were intended not to compete with public schools, but to support them. Charters were supposed to be research and development laboratories for discovering better ways of educating hard-to-educate children. They were not intended to siphon away the most motivated students and families in the poorest communities, but to address some of the public schools' most urgent problems. (*The Death and Life of the Great American School System* 146)

As Ravitch comments, charter schools were intended to be an alternative for disenfranchised students. Today there seems to be some confusion about what charter schools are, who teaches in them, who gets to attend them, and what impact charters have on traditional public schools, important questions that are essential to a healthy praxis, the cyclical process of questioning and applying, questioning and reapplying.

*The Definition Expands*

In 1991, Ravitch worked under Lamar Alexander as the secretary to the U.S. Department of Education to improve accountability for teachers and schools. During her

tenure in Washington, she also helped "develop 'voluntary national standards'" (*The Death and Life of the Great American School System* 7). The department was operating under a Republican agenda: "standards and choice" (8). Choice became synonymous with charter schools. This was not Shanker's intent when he proposed the laboratory model.

Ravitch explains that charter schools had the simultaneous support of Democrats who "saw an opportunity to reinvent government" and Republicans who saw them as "a chance to diminish the power of the teacher's unions, which in their view, protect jobs and pensions while blocking effective management and innovation" (9). Ravitch helped support both of these positions until 2009 when she realized that accountability, standards, and choice were eclipsing curriculum and instruction. In short, accountability in the form of testing was "not just a measure but an end in itself" (12). Politicians were falling prey to the temptation of false objectivity which testing offers.

The growing popularity of charter schools is evident in their rising enrollment, but there is also a culture of misconceptions among parents and politicians about the schools. Many people seem to believe that charter programs are superior schools for talented students. (I thought this.) It is easy to see why parents want to enroll their children and why politicians are quick to hitch their support to the charter school bandwagon.

In *Reign of Error*, Ravitch reports that in the year 2012, charter schools "enrolled about two million students" (158). Charter schools do not only affect the students who attend them. Because charter schools take funding and student enrollment away from neighborhood schools, the number of children impacted by the growth of charter schools cannot be estimated by charter enrollment alone; nearly all children who attend any form of public school are affected by the growth of charter schools.

Today, there are a variety of charter schools differing in regulation and focus. John Morely, author of "For-Profit and Nonprofit Charter Schools: An Agency Cost Approach," explains "charter schools are notoriously hard to define" (1782). Despite this, Morely, states, "The key characteristic of a charter school is that it combines public funding with private management…Prior to opening, a charter school must receive a 'charter' from a statutorily authorized agent" (1786-1787). In other words, public charters are funded by the state, but they can be started by someone who is not affiliated with a government entity.

In 2004, The Department of Education released "Charter School Title V, Part B" in order to get closer to a unified definition. The report contains a list of twelve essential points a charter must meet. For a full listing of these twelve points, see Appendix A. Most importantly, these points describe how charters compare to traditional public schools. Points 1 and 12 read:

> [1.] In accordance with a specific State statute authorizing the granting of charters to schools, is exempt from significant State or local rules that inhibit the flexible operation and management of public schools, but not from any rules relating to the other requirements…[and]
>
> [12] Has a written performance contract with the authorized public chartering agency in the State that includes a description of how student performance will be measured in charter schools pursuant to State assessments that are required of other schools and pursuant to any other assessments mutually agreeable to the authorized public chartering agency and the charter school. (U.S. Dept. of Education, Charter School Program Title V, Part B)

Thus, charters are afforded special "flexibility" in order to achieve high marks on "assessments" within an allotted time frame. Notice that this definition allows for variation in charters as each state will have different guidelines pertaining to "performance contracts" and "state assessment."

Because the agent who issues the charter does not need to be a government entity, charter schools vary greatly in their design and implementation. For example, there are national charter programs like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), designed with college as the goal. KIPP's "Five Pillars" are: "high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, focus on results" (KIPP). Implicit in this statement of purpose is that the charter program exists to get quantitative results such as test scores and college enrollment statistics. There are also programs focused on concepts of child character development, such as the internationally known Montessori program. With all these differences in goals and methods, it becomes important for states to regulate the overall quality of these schools.

*Regulating Quality*

Immense differences remain in state-by-state regulations. In 2012, less than half of all states required charter school teachers to be uniformly licensed. Other states had a set number of required licenses per school. Similarly, some states had no regulation about teacher licenses or additional state-enforced charter school laws (Exstrom 2). Charter schools operating in Washington State did not require teacher licensure, meaning anyone with a Bachelor's degree could potentially become a charter school teacher. Meanwhile, charter schools in the state of Minnesota required teacher licensure. Consequently, students in similarly themed charter programs in Washington State and Minnesota might experience a vastly different quality of education. Evidence indicates that teacher licensure training influences overall quality of education. A study of 4,400 teachers conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond found that "certified teachers consistently

produced significantly higher achievements than uncertified teachers…" (2). Overall charter quality, therefore, becomes a concern as regulations for these schools is inconsistent across the country.

*The Standards*

Why then would a teacher, licensed or unlicensed, choose to teach in a charter school? As I began to investigate charter school politics and implementation, I wondered if the answer might be found in the surge in standards. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects ("the Standards"), "are the culmination of an extended, broad-based effort to fulfill the charge issued by the states to create the next generation of K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school" ("Common Core State Standards for English Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects" Introduction). In other words, the Standards are an attempt to create a common proficiency for all K-12 students. The Standards go on to say that they do not require any one method for achieving this objective. Instead, it remains up to the teacher to determine what works best for their particular students. Standards in and of themselves are not a bad idea when they give teachers a prompt for critical self-reflection and modification of pedagogical methods. For example, if teachers know they must help students reach a certain proficiency, they can set goals, and revise their teaching strategies when they fall short of those goals. The Standards allow the teacher a measure of flexibility to reach those goals in whatever way works best for the students. However, there is also a danger in the Standards when we fail

to acknowledge the array of student starting points, and when we measure the success of teachers by high stakes assessment testing. Teachers may feel pressure to teach to the test, setting limits on their time for pedagogical reflection and personal teaching philosophies.

As public schools move into the era of Common Core and standardization, do teachers feel confined by the pressure to be someone who implements predetermined curriculum rather than someone who spends time critically reacting to the needs of students? If so, are these standards forcing teachers to change their instructional identity and teaching philosophy in order to remedy any existing dissonance between who they are as instructors and who they need to be in the classroom in order to deliver a large amount of information quickly? Are teachers using the Standards as a prompt for criticality and praxis?

*Forming a Hypothesis: Pedagogical Praxis*

This line of inquiry became a hypothesis about why one would choose to teach in a charter program. Charter school teachers would be key in gaining one definition of what a charter school is and who their students are. I theorized: (1.) teachers feel their instruction is more authentic when their teaching philosophy aligns with the goals of a charter, and (2) struggling students may do better in flexible charter program.

However, it wasn't long before the direction of my investigations shifted. I found myself questioning the pedagogical theory behind charter schools as I observed teacher practice. There was a disconnect between Shanker's definition and the reality of charter schools. There were contradictions between the educator's goals and the inherent

ideology in their interview responses. Charter schools were not always contributing to a democratization of education or the critical inquiry that Freire espoused. They were teaching alternatives curriculum such as character values, but they were also inextricably linked to capitalism, the dominant free-market model, and enrollment data. Examination of the interview narratives and observational data resulted in a new hypothesis: educational and pedagogical theory can be co-opted by ideology if educators do not partake in self-directed critical inquiry, and charter schools are perhaps especially prone to this temptation because they are operating under a supposed homogenous pedagogical theory. Charter school teachers were not always examining their pedagogical theory and practice in order to form new theories and reapply them. They were not participating in critical praxis.

*A Note on Reading the Study*

My discussion of readings, narrative experience, and interview transcriptions are often in the present tense. The discussion is in the past tense as I look back and try to make sense of my experiences. Given the subjective nature of education, I began from my own narrative experience in order to understand the experience of others. This is followed by an exploration of thematic trends and emerging questions.

# CHAPTER TWO: VISITING MIDWESTERN CHARTERS

To investigate my hypothesis, I visited with five Midwestern educators in two states. I asked the educators a total of 10 to 12 questions each. The schools were in two districts, areas populated by 30,000 to 80,000 residents. All locations and names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the identity of those interviewed. My Human Research Subject (IRB) form is included in Appendix B.

## *The Teachers Interviewed*

During my research, I met with two male instructors, two female instructors, and one male principal. All of the interviews occurred in-person in one session of about thirty minutes to about two and a half hours, depending on the availability of the instructor and their willingness to share experiences. Two of the five interviews were with instructors who had been teaching less than ten years. One interviewee had been teaching for ten to fifteen years. Two interviewees had twenty-five or more years of experience.

## *Charter School A (Montessori Middle School): Neal*

My initial request for interviews with charter A was answered by a parent named Lauren who was on the board that created the school. I explained my goals for the visit, including: to explore charter schools as an innovative educational tool, to understand where teacher's develop their philosophies, to understand how public school systems are changing to meet student needs, to gain perspective on the role standardized testing plays in meeting those needs, and to be a better teacher. Lauren asked me to be a part of a

summer meditation program she was putting together with the help of charters school Montessori teachers. I was slightly taken aback. I knew nothing about meditation. More importantly, I'd never worked with students under the age of 18 in any professional capacity, and this seemed like a deviation from my original research goals.

I soon confirmed that the summer meditation camp was not officially tied to the Montessori program. Thus, my introduction to charter schools was not through any official capacity, although Lauren's contact information was the only email on the school's website. Upon meeting Lauren, it became clear that these unofficial connections were not that unusual in some charter schools. Everyone seemed connected, and titles seemed unimportant. A middle school teacher could be running the Montessori summer school for elementary students the following summer. (In fact, this is exactly what happened.)

Lauren and I agreed to meet. In her email, she thanked me, complimenting my attention to detail in a manner that became familiar as I observed Montessori teachers. At our first meeting, she told me a little about her non-profit character strengths organization and the Montessori charter she helped organize. I didn't understand how the non-profit was linked to the Montessori charter except that Lauren felt passionate about both of these things, and she helped keep both running using many of the same contacts. She encouraged the charter to support the non-profit and vice versa. When we parted, and I tentatively agreed to help someone else run a summer camp, she asked me to memorize two pages of listed virtues so that I might practice verbally recognizing them in my daily life. This is the type of passion that drives one to start a school.

The list of virtues I needed to memorize included character traits deemed positive. They were catalogued by a national project and championed by Lauren. The list included: "cleanliness," "fit," "insightful," "patient," "productive," "quiet," "unique," and "worthy," to name a select few (Kurka Nagel 37-38). While I didn't know it at the time, the American Montessori Society notes that Montessori schools consider education in terms of character and "the whole child" ("Montessori Education and Your Child"). The meditation camp was just another way to focus on these character strengths without being burdened by school regulations. My initial visit to the Montessori charter for middle school grades was organized by Lauren who connected me to the lead teacher.

On the day of my initial visit, Neal was engaged in a parent call that went long. When his students arrived, we met in the hallway. Everyone crossed their legs and continued to eat breakfast on the floor as we sat in a circle. Neal rang a chime to signal the beginning of the morning town hall meeting. The chime was portable, like a xylophone, with its own wand to create a mild ping. It allowed him the chance to gain his students' attention without having to shout, therefore setting the tone for the conversation (20 May 2014).

After some prodding, Neal's students talked about their various end-of-year committee projects. Each small group was organizing a part of the final school day: a talent show, cooking, art, and fishing. All of the things you might expect. I recognized this class even though it was a mixture of ages at a charter school. The girl with the books. The boy who was constantly doing something important that everyone needs to look at. The boy who asks *what's her name again?* in reference to me while making eye contact with me.

When we've gotten to know each other better, I tell Neal about my anxiety in teaching people who are still so easily influenced even at the college level, the weight of making mistakes. He tells me he feels the same anxiety, but then he reminds himself that we often underestimate how much we have to teach our students (20 May 2014). My teaching of college freshman and Neal's teaching of middle school students feel different. The unofficial things Neal teaches students are the foundation for their entire adult lives. He doesn't have the luxury of feeling overwhelmed by his responsibility. Perhaps this is why Neal, someone who has been teaching for approximately ten years, was chosen to lead the start-up of the Montessori program. He seems to take the stress and fatigue in stride. Perhaps this is why a small group of parents felt comfortable entrusting him with the funds and the students to start a school from almost nothing.

During my observation, Neal listened to student questions. He ignored some students who talked out of turn. He redirected inattentive students when needed with a response I got familiar with during my time observing Neal. He said some variation of it often. When a student talked out of turn, he might say, "Sara, while I appreciate and admire your *friendliness* [or insert positive character trait], I really need you to maybe pay attention to what your classmates have to say right now." Neal used the Virtues Project to teach. This means he recognized student character strengths and challenged students to grow the virtues he saw as less dominant in their lives (The Virtues Project).

In Neal's classroom, I watched as his students set to work on their various projects while Neal quietly guided them when needed. Students worked on several tasks according to their own interests. There was quiet chatter as they helped each other on tasks like historic Photoshop where the student's photograph is added to a historic image.

Montessori teachers give students options about what they would like to work on. Advocates reason that children have "absorbent minds" that have critical periods in which learning tasks makes more sense. Children indicate when they are ready; a teacher need only pay attention and guide the student to the right materials. Such is the theory. Keeping with this theory, there was no full group instruction on the day I visited. Instead, Neal talked to all of his students individually.

During the morning worktime, I sat in a corner, nodding at all the familiar and strange teaching aids. Around the room, there were posters: "Virtues: The Gift of Character." A black and white photo of Maria Montessori. A library dominated the back wall.

There was also a bulletin board where I saw small traces of Neal. He had a bumper sticker advocating ecology and sustainable farming practices on the board. The bumper sticker was evidence of Neal's personal life which included a family and at least three additional tutoring and summer programing jobs. He was well-educated. He has been a teacher of both traditional and charter programs for ten years. He had a Master's degree as well as a Montessori certification, evidence he had undergone intensive training to be a Montessori teacher. The part about his Master's degree surprised me. Why make such a radical change after a traditional education and early career?

The answer seems to lie in his values. All of his experiences resulted in a pedagogy focused on the importance of mindfulness, compassion, and ecology. These things are essential to his teaching, although he never directly lectured to his students about them, allowing them to learn by personal investigation if and when they were ready. For Neal, being a charter school teacher meant getting a chance to share what he

knows about being alive in a human world along with traditional knowledge about math and reading even though you will never see a multiple choice question about the virtue of trust on a state test (20 May 2014).

The risks of having quit his stable teaching job for this uncertain charter school position seemed to hint toward what freedom from the constraints of the Standards meant to Neal. I could tell he believed in the program from the animated way he talked about it, and so he was willing to brave the drawbacks of a new charter.

I also observed Neal make the conscious decision not to let his students learn in isolation from the greater community. Students rode the city bus to plant organic vegetables at a nearby urban garden that funded a program for the homeless. Along the way, everything became a lesson. The city streets became a part of Neal's curriculum. This is how you calculate the price of bus fare for 28 students. This is how you show thanks. This is how you communicate effectively with a team. This is what manual labor looks like.

My day with Neal's class ended in the community garden. After a day of backbreaking work in the garden, I had three new blisters and a sunburn to show for my time. The blisters broke and oozed in the days that followed my immersion. The enthusiasm and hope I felt for Neal's pedagogy became more complicated than planting a seed in a garden and waiting for it to grow.

I remembered the concerns posed about charter schools not fulfilling Shanker's vision. I tried to weigh what I'd read against what I'd experienced in one example of a charter program. I went in thinking middle school students needed a community of other middle school students rather than being embedded in a host high school, as this charter

was. Then I found myself making counterarguments like: having a small, more isolated middle school may actually encourage an environment ripe for deeper connections rather than many shallow ones. I found myself thinking about the lack of ESL and special needs services offered by small charter schools, and I reasoned that there must be a reason for this too. Surely, a school advocating helping the homeless would not overlook services for minority students. I found myself thinking that the charter program allowed for human learning rather than standardized learning. I wanted very badly to see the answer to direct instruction, inflexible standards, and high-stakes testing in Neal's pedagogy. Instead, I observed a variation of the original problem. Neal's classroom was built on a theory that was not being consistently put into practice with a critical lens.

*Charter School A (Montessori Middle School): John*

John, Neal's co-teacher, gave up his prep period to help Neal on the day I visited. John was a young teacher who only recently completed his Montessori training. He was in the first ten years of his career. For me, he printed a packet of information on Maria Montessori so that I might understand the controlled chaos of the Montessori classroom. He showed me the greenhouse where students planted. He wanted to show me the dragon from the students' English project. He wanted me to understand what all this meant to him.

*Charter Program B (Montessori Elementary School): Mark*

In contrast, that summer I also visited a Montessori summer session for the more successful elementary school. The elementary program was in a building gifted to the

charter by the city in the middle of a beautiful park just outside of the city. As is typical of the Montessori program, students were in multi-age classrooms consisting of three age groups. All classrooms had many tactile manipulatives and wooden or natural materials. There were beads for learning math and sandpaper letters to learn cursive. A large rug was the centerpiece of each classroom, a place for students to gather in small groups. All classrooms had materials to teach them about doing dishes, dusting, and sweeping, a nod to the Montessori idea of meaningful work. In the back of the building, a greenhouse stood to house the students' science lessons.

This classroom visit felt different from my visit to Neal's middle school classroom in a way that does not show up in my interview transcripts. Perhaps the difference has to do with the elementary school's success. The elementary school's enrollment necessitated a lottery process due to its popularity. It had plans of expanding to include preschool children. The teachers had paraprofessional assistants even during the summer session. Students seemed comfortable with the expectations of Montessori teachers in a way that hinted that these were students who never experienced other forms of education. I was experiencing the Montessori program in a stable form. There was supportive administration and a community of likeminded teachers working in conjunction with one another.

The principal, an enthusiastic man named Mark, invited me into his office on the day of my visit. He was warm and friendly, the perfect ambassador for prospective parents. He was a principal in the last half of his career. Mark gave me a proud tour of his school, stopping to explain that each of the multi-level classrooms cost $20,000-30,000 in

materials alone. It was important that the tactile materials be natural wood rather than synthetic materials (17 June 2014).

At one point Mark and I walked by a classroom in use, and I heard a child say, "I need the moveable ABC's." There were 30 kids to one of these expensive classrooms. They did math and reading every day, but they had some flexibility about their other subjects. The teacher was considered to be a guide, or as one of the Montessori teachers told me, "I'm a guide on the side."

This version of the Montessori program has 160 enrolled children. It was founded nine years earlier, also by a group of parents in an elementary host school, but when the charter began to grow, and the host school had no additional classrooms to yield, the district gifted this new building to the charter for a price of $1. Mark reminded me that while this price sounds nice, the building had to be "gutted" (17 June 2014). The building is a reminder that education reform can be swift. Ironically, twenty years prior, the building had been dedicated to isolated special education. When special education students were later integrated into the public school system, the building sat vacant.

Mark knew it all. He could have talked to me about charter programing for hours longer if he wasn't also required in a meeting. He had a way of positively spinning all experience. He was not just excited about what he did, he was also in control and ready to talk to prospective parents. My experience with Mark was very different than either of my visits with Neal or John. I was picking up on the concerns of teachers and principals and the resulting difference in the rhetoric used to discuss education. All the educators I spoke with had a deep concern for the well-being of children; however, there always seemed to be a sales pitch at the heart of Mark's speech.

*Charter School C (Non-Montessori Middle School): Susan*

Sifting through the interview data for both Montessori programs motivated me to seek out another type of charter experience, specifically a different type of charter program. In the fall of that year, I decided to collect the stories of two more charter school teachers in a program one state away.

The second type of program was not primarily a Montessori school although the elementary charter recently started a popular Montessori program within the larger charter. Here again, the school retained its own building just outside of town. On the day I visited to interview a middle school teacher, I was instructed to go around to the back of the building where a small prefab building housed the middle school grades. I was surprised to find that the classroom I visited resembled exactly what I might call a traditional classroom. There were posters and abandoned art supplies, all of the signs of the chaos involved in working with middle school students daily. In contrast to a traditional public classroom, there were markedly fewer students (less than ten) and a certain attitude of flexibility toward time schedules. Besides these differences, this might have been any traditional public classroom.

Susan, the teacher, was different than the other educators I'd interviewed. She was in the last ten years of her career. She taught in a traditional classroom before teaching in a charter. In her former career, she dedicated herself to helping with extracurricular activities, traveling with the teams several days a week. She was even the recipient of a prodigious award. However, when she relocated, she found herself struggling to attain a permanent teaching job. This is the key difference between Susan

and the other charter school educators I interviewed: teaching in a charter program was not her first choice. Susan was perhaps the most pessimistic about charter programs.

As a result, I found Susan in opposition to some of the statements made by other charter school teachers. Susan was quick to tell me she didn't teach differently because she was in a charter school. She told me that experiential learning looks good, but there isn't always time for it. At one point during our interview, she apologized to me before expressing her anger at institutions who are constantly researching education, explaining that sometimes things are fine the way they are. Not everything needs to be measured and changed (20 Oct. 2014). But no matter how pessimistic and overworked Susan appeared, she spoke with me during her prep period and then again after school let out. Each time her students came up, she wanted to share their triumphs.

*Charter School D (Partial Montessori Elementary School): Jenny*

I saw similar pride in Jenny, an elementary teacher in the same system as Susan. Jenny told me that she began her career as a teacher in a local private school, but she moved to the charter soon after. She had been teaching for less than ten years. She was young, energetic, and outspoken about her opposition to standardized testing. Not even ten minutes into the interview, it became clear that Jenny and Susan didn't just differ in the ways they came to the program. Jenny explained she wanted to take more graduate classes and eventually teach other teachers. She was enthusiastic about the choice and innovation of her charter program, sometimes in direct opposition to Susan.

*Demographic of the Charter Schools*

All Midwestern charter school programs were chosen for their proximity. Both programs self-reported class sizes of fewer than 30 students.

| **Self-Reported Demographic Data of Schools (2012-2013)** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | School Enrollment | Students of Color* | Qualification for Free/Reduced Lunches |
| Charter School A | 34 | 5.71% | 38% |
| Charter School B | 160 | approx.2% | 15% |
| **Total for Public Schools in the Area** | **14,949** | **24.92%** | **34%** |
| | | | |
| Charter Schools C and D | 271 | 12.93% | 61.62%** |
| **Total for Public Schools in the Area** | **9,423** | **11.66%** | **30.01%**** |
| | | | |
| | | | |

*Note that the school districts report diversity with the phrase "students of color" or "non-white students," revealing an ideological position. In this case, the ideological phrase "non-white," creates a racial normativity: white as the default with all other racial positions being the "other."
** Listed as "economically disadvantaged."

The teachers I visited articulated ideological position statements that unconsciously revealed ingrained beliefs about education. As educators, their genuine 'passion' was contagious and idyllic, making it even more important to critically examine what passion means when put into uncritical practice. The following analysis is my attempt to formulate questions concerning the gap between theory and practice after hearing the interview responses. All of the resulting discussion is a product of my own ideology.

*Limitations*

The limitations of the sample size and lack of a traditional public school control group are important to note. The interview and narrative data discuss questions related to current trends in education reform but responses/observations are not universally true for all charter school educators. My discussion of identity, ideology, and access are based on my readings, interviews, site-visits and field notes. In the case of any human inquiry, conclusive discussion is never as straightforward as it seems. One can never know what it is like to occupy the position of another or to be faced with the complexity of another's pedagogical decisions. The educators I interacted with are caring individuals in the midst of major education reforms. It is not my goal to pass judgment on any of these committed educators but to observe and question pedagogy as an outsider.

*Overview of Qualitative Data Collection*

The method of collection was heavily influenced by Janet Alsup's *Teacher Identity Discourses* and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In Alsup's research, she collects teacher narratives and "explores the genre of metaphor" within each (47). Alsup uses qualitative data collection and thematic coding in conjunction with observational notes. Likewise, in my own research, I've thematically coded interview data as it relates to my observational notes and narrative analysis.

All interviewees answered a series of ten to twelve questions in-person. Questions were designed with three main foci in mind: to inquire about how instructors developed their identity as teachers, to discuss perceptions surrounding charter programs, and to investigate the way the interviewee felt standardization impacted the education system.

The questions were designed with the knowledge that teaching philosophies are always in progress. A complete list of interview questions is included here:

Interview Questions

1. How is your teaching style different than a non-charter public school?
2. What is the most important thing you teach children?
3. Charter schools' original purpose has been described as being "research and development laboratories for discovering better ways of educating hard-to-educate-children" (Ravitch 146). Would you say this is still the case?
4. How did you develop your teaching philosophy?
5. What role do you see charter schools playing in the future of public education?
6. In your opinion, what is the goal of public education? What should the goal be?
7. Can you talk about the role testing has in our current public education system?
8. What problem do you see your school solving that isn't solved by other public schools?
9. What problems or new debates are created by charter schools?
10. How does your school determine which students are enrolled? Is it a lottery system?
11. Do you have or are you pursuing a graduate degree? If so, please describe the program.
12. Do you engage in professional development activities? If so, are they offered and or supported by your school?

Design of the interview questions and interpretation of the response data was also informed by the critical questioning of Paulo Freire. As I interviewed and thematically coded the interviews, I kept in mind: teaching in and of itself is always political whether it involves government or not. This is true of traditional public, private, or charter instruction. In *Teachers as Cultural Workers,* critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, comments, "As educators we are politicians" (68). We make choices about what and how to teach every day. We influence how students think about the world. This is political. Non-neutrality is another way of saying we are unable to separate ourselves from our identity while we teach. We are always influenced by our experience and the best we can do is verbalize recognition of our subjectivity. Thus, when I wrote my interview

questions, I was writing them from a subjective position, and when I interpreted the responses, I was looking for patterns of teacher subjectivity.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. My coding process consisted of a set of evolving qualitative themes within the transcriptions. As a human researcher, I was not without my own subjectivities; however, the themes were established after the interviews. I analyzed the narrative data by coding the transcription and categorizing common threads across all interviews.

Coding took place under the assumption that we reveal personal ideological positions in the language we use. The speaker need not be conscious of the values they are championing with language and action. In fact, Critical Theorist Stephen D. Brookfield points out: "When a belief seems natural and obvious and when it serves to reproduce existing systems, structures, and behaviors, it is ideological" (67). Dominant ideological positions are unchallenged ideas that reinforce the status quo. Thus, dominant ideologies that are harmful to oppressed groups are often reinforced without the knowledge of those who uncritically hold the position. Ideological positions are reinforced through language, belief, and action. It is not possible to get beyond ideology in order to avoid our personal subjectivities in language. During the coding process, I was looking for semantic choices that revealed ideological positions even if the educator was unaware of them.

I subdivided coding categories whenever possible. The original themes were:

1. Access to the humanities
    A. Creativity of teacher instruction
    B. Creativity of student
2. Access in education
3. Humanity of teachers
    A. Ideology of teacher philosophy and pedagogical statements

a. Linguistic moves charged by ideology

4. Curriculum
5. Testing
6. Charter Schools
    A. Differences in charter descriptions and definitions
    B. Montessori methodology

During the coding process, I reconfigured the transcriptions several times so that common passages were categorized together. After multiple rounds of coding, the most prominent patterns were:

1. Access
    A. Economic class
    B. Community resources
    C. School resources
    D. Enrollment
2. Ideology
    A. Linguistic moves charged by capitalism
    B. Descriptions of education's purpose
    C. Descriptions of teacher identity
3. Charter schools
    A. What are they for?
    B. Who are they for?
    C. Conflicting definitions of what they are

The final coding configuration allowed for side-by-side comparisons of the way educators spoke about the same concept, sometimes revealing slight differences or contradictory definitions.

# CHAPTER THREE: INSTRUCTION OF VALUES

## *Teaching Values in the Montessori Charter*

Many of the educators interviewed told narratives about teaching the virtues they saw as positive, the value they saw in community involvement, and the importance of hard work. All of the educators told some form of narrative about the importance of education as a human experience involving values that required lessons not included in Common Core standards.

At the end of the interviews, I went back and listened to John and Neal on the tape. I remembered Lauren's big eyes as she explained the Montessori program, and I knew why these educators dedicated so much time to the program. They believed the program meant teaching children how to live compassionate lives that would create a kinder more understanding community.

The Montessori teachers had a common language to describe these values. In a characteristic example of Montessori language that I would hear repeated often, Neal told me that the "goal of public education is ultimately to educate our students… through academics, but also through experiential learning, trying to meet the needs of the whole child through character development and also through a kind of moralistic way of teaching about the wider world" (20 May 2014). Here Neal is providing a new definition of charter schools, as programs designed not only to teach math and science, but as programs designed to teach values. In a larger sense, this seems important in the education of any child; however, this pedagogical theory becomes more complicated. The values were often those championed by the individual teachers or by the Virtues Project

in the case of the Montessori teachers. The morals being taught were those perceived to be positive and important, but the missing part of this activity is the criticality, the reflection. The questions: who sees these values as important? Is this group of people culturally diverse and inclusive? Are teachers favoring virtues that makes students behavior better or virtues that makes students active participants in government? Without reflection, morals can privilege dominant ideological positions that reinforce the status quo. This is particularly important in order to avoid teaching students values that will make them *diligent* workers rather than *critical* workers.

Neal talks about values being one reason the charter is important to him. He says, "I want to be teaching [students] not only about academics but how we treat each other as human beings… it's a really challenging feat to accomplish when you're with a child 47 minutes out of the day. To think about, you know, how it is that you can incorporate character development into your lesson" (20 May 2014). In this instance, being a charter school teacher means Neal can teach in a way he feels is more true to what he believes is the purpose of education.

With the same Montessori terminology, Mark talked about his growth from counselor to teacher to principal saying, "I always kind of had that sense of wanting to see that help, that supporting, to create a well-rounded child…I think that has always been a strong belief of mine…academics are important, but we have to look at other things with kids too" (17 June 2014). Here again, Mark did not remain in the traditional teaching role he started in. Instead, he moved to a charter position based on the way his values more closely aligned with the charter.

*Aligning Pedagogy with Identity*

John told me that being a teacher, for him, has meant learning how to teach in a way that aligns with his identity. He says,

> Depending on the talents and the personalities, the dispositions of these two [teachers], what they do in the classroom may look very different, and I think I'm still becoming comfortable with that, with that, for me personally, I am just very introverted. It's a lot of energy for me to just be in front of people. My verbal communication is something that I've always had to work on and going through high school I never thought I'd be a teacher. It just freaked me out so that leadership looks a little different for who I am, and I have to be okay with that, and I have to know that that is going to work for me, and I don't get burned out, or I'm not emotionally unstable because I'm trying to do something or be somebody I'm not. So I think that's an important piece that's looked over. It's just well what do you think is the best way to educate, well, for me that's knowing who I am and how I can fit into that picture. (20 May 2014)

Very candidly, John expresses that the Montessori teaching style is more closely connected to his strengths. While John does not expressly mention the way his teaching reflects values, he does imply that inauthentic teaching can be exhausting. In other words, teaching means knowing what one believes and feels, first and foremost, in order to find a position that meets those needs. Above, John is expressing the negotiation of teacher identity creation. John is leaning how to "respect personal beliefs and passions while learning to embody a teacher identity" (Alsup 37).

*Teachers as Parents*

In some instances, charter school teachers told narratives that equated teachers to parents. Teachers talked about instilling important values in students in support of parents or in place of missing parental guidance. For example, Susan, from a non-Montessori program, told me:

> It seems kind of like as the years have gone on, I would say there is a whole generation of parents out there that did a horrible job, a horrible disservice to the kids. So they come here and they don't know that they should show respect to elders. They don't even respect their fellow students which… which is sad. And so, we have to start off with the basics… So I think that once you teach the kids how to respect authority, how to respect each other, and then how to respect themselves, the learning comes so much easier for them. (20 Oct. 2014)

Susan was not alone in feeling there has been a shift in parenting values which teachers need to compensate for. John also commented that his job is to make up for a deficit. He said, "The family unit is not as strong as it used to be definitely" (20 June 2014). These teachers believe in the importance of character development, placing them in a parenting role. John and Susan are also commenting on an ideological definition of what family does. The family used to teach values. Now teachers must teach values.

Mark supported the idea of teacher as parent, adding that the teacher is "hopefully" not a replacement for the actual parent but a support. He said that the Montessori method focused on values. However, he shied away from saying that virtues or values were *taught* to children, instead he commented, "I don't see us teaching [respect] as much as us supporting hopefully what is being taught at home" (17 June 2014). This language choice may actually be a commentary on where the values being taught are ideologically perceived to originate. Are they values the parents have at all? Or are they ideological positions held by the teacher? If Mark uses the word teach, this would imply that teachers have a lot of influence over students and then the question remains: what if the values being taught are not the values "supported" at home? And if teachers have that much influence over children's values, we may need to pay more attention to the human needs of education and less about the standardization of curriculum and testing.

*The Importance of Community*

The strongest value that emerged in the interviews was: community interaction. For example, during my classroom visit, I observed Neal creating community within his classroom. His classroom was one where community was encouraged among students. Students could work together, learn from each other, and even socialize.

Neal explained to me, in many classrooms, students learn from the teacher, but in a multi-age classroom, students learn by investigation and by teaching what they know to other students. Along with the freedom to move and talk, Neal gave his students the chance to act out. As he explained to me later, teachers want to correct everything. They want to jump in the moment they see students getting distracted, but sometimes it is best to let students act out so that they may observe their deviance and correct themselves (20 May 2014). This is one of the ways he tries to treat all of his students like adults who get to make choices about their lives.

Other programs focused on building community with local organizations. Many of the programs had various community affiliates including local non-profits and charity organizations. In fact, when I recounted my time in Neal's classroom earlier, his class had physically relocated to a community garden for the afternoon. He told me they would be there several days that week. Similarly, Jenny, a non-Montessori teacher, told me that she felt the pedagogy of her charter program wasn't any different than a traditional classroom except for the fact that charters "place a lot of emphasis on the community and projects" (16 Oct. 2014). Jenny talks about letting her students pick which community organizations the school partners with, and then getting the students out into the

community to do service learning. She mentioned working with the local animal shelter and the nature center in previous years.

Mark described not only the volunteer work his students do, but also, the way the community works to educate students. In Mark's view of education, the community is as much responsible for educating students as teachers are for getting students out into the community. Mark mentioned the competition for resources that often occurs between a charter school and a traditional school. His solution to this lack of resources was to have the community step up to meet that gap. He says:

> I think there is creativity and the idea of sharing that sometimes is difficult right now with charter schools just as being more new sometimes. There is this dogma of, well, a traditional school teacher is feeling like charter schools are taking away their best students. So it's leaving the original school in just more trouble, but one thing with that is engaging the community... Just what charter school have been able to do of pulling in volunteers to do different classes or taking the YMCA and seeing what they have to offer for like physical education and different programs. So there is already things in the community that I think is an untapped resource for public education to be really more of a community-based idea rather than just a building with teachers. (17 June 2014)

In Mark's explanation of a charter's engagement with the community, the entire community contributes to the curriculum, an idea hinting that the traditional classroom setting misses entire subjects of learning and development, an idea beyond the scope of Shanker's vision. This idea also implies that those with teacher certifications are not always the most appropriate to teach a subject. This is an interesting idea, but may not be feasible for all communities. School districts in rural areas or school districts serving communities with fewer educational resources would not be able to rely on the community for the same Zumba, Harp, or Yoga lessons. In this instance, a charter is acting as an alternative for affluent communities.

The emphasis being placed on community involvement is ironic here as charter schools effectively break down the model of schools as neighborhood anchors. Where once public schools were a rallying point for neighborhoods, a point of connection in a public sphere, now families commute outside of their neighborhoods to attend school. The theory of charter schools valuing their community is at odds with the practice of moving outside of your community to attend school.

Similarly paradoxical, is the student body demographic reported for charter schools A and B with the school's emphasis on community. Charter schools A and B placed heavy emphasis on community and the Virtues Project. However, the surrounding area reported a population that was 24.92% "of color" while the charter schools A and B reported approximately 2% and 5.71% diversity in the student population. There is a significant difference in diversity between the traditional public schools and these Montessori programs. The Montessori programs value community without representing a significant portion of the community. This complicates the teaching of virtues further because students may not be exposed to minority students who perhaps emphasize a different set of virtues. Further, I wonder how well students can learn to be tolerant and compassionate in isolation from those that are different from themselves. This also brings one back to an earlier question: whose values and whose definition of these values are being emphasized in a school with 2 to 5.71% diversity? The Virtues Project is a nationally recognized program, but these are also the values that Lauren, a white middle class woman, recognizes as part of her own identity. This is not to say any one individual is consciously privileging racial identity. This is a systemic and geographic reality.

It is important to note, charter schools C and D had a combined diversity that was higher than the traditional public schools. This is an interesting difference that may be linked to the lottery system, the location of the schools, or possibly, the marketing of the charter's common theme or lack of a theme in the case of charter schools C and D. Additional research is needed to determine if charter school diversity is linked to any one particular cause.

*The Value of Physical Work*

Another important value I saw in my interviews was the idea that the physical body cannot be separated from the mental work students do in school. This was very evident to me as I planted with Neal's class. Perhaps no one vocalized support for physical work more strongly than John who said, "Just getting [his students] out and doing physical work…being involved in that service and learning from it and being comfortable in those types of activities… we are all here to serve one another in both what we do and what we live for" (20 May 2014). The learning that students are doing is better, according to John, for having that physical output of work and energy.

John talks about wanting students to see themselves as "capable." Capability, for John, is tied to hard work. He says, "Hard work is definitely an admirable trait… with hard work and their individuality, they can accomplish a lot and be very happy" (20 May 2014). This is an interesting idea given the historic division of laboring classes who are not always seen as powerful. The connection between physical labor and the idea of schools teaching children to willingly labor, subject to those with more power, seems at odds with education. The ramifications of an association between work and physical toil

is also a way to desensitize students to the physical labor their adult occupations may require, an unintended ideological state apparatus (ISA). However, when John described his philosophy, he didn't describe the inherent process of teaching his students about power structures. He seemed to see this physical labor and learning as interconnected so that bookwork could have an authentic context and therefore forge stronger associations between theory and practice.

*Privatization of Public Education*

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser theorizes that the goals of public education (an ISA) are to reinforce the creation of a working class. He says,

> But besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to 'speak proper French', to 'handle' the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to 'order them about' properly, i.e. (ideally) to 'speak to them' in the right way, etc.
>
> To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'. ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses").

The educators within the study seemed to want the very best for their students, but they are a part of a system that no longer serves its original purpose. The purpose of education according to Freire is to liberate the educated; this includes the worker. The purpose of

charter schools according to Shanker is to allow students an alternative if they struggle in the traditional system, to be a lab school. This requires critical praxis, theory and critical practice, re-examination of theory, and re-application of theory. But if the point of charter school education is also inherently to compete for enrollment, the purpose will always be to get parents to buy the product: the schools. Criticality becomes less important in this equation, and Althusser's theory about what schools are teaching children looks like students learning not by critical investigation but by experiential learning that also teaches the "reproduction" of labor, that hard physical labor is valuable inherently. This is banking education in another form. Students are told they are experiencing something important as they bend over beds of soil and dig their hands in to plant beans. It may be true that this experience will make them well-adjusted adults, but it will make them well-adjusted adults in a system that sees people as worthy for what they can produce.

For philosopher Louis Althusser, ideology reproduces dominance using two main systems of control: the repressive state apparatus (RSA) and the ideological state apparatus (ISA) ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses").

There are also ISAs at work in all education systems. Althusser says ISAs are:

> a systematic form of thought control that ensured that people at all levels of the economic and social system accepted the system's basic reasonableness. Ideology intentionally obscured the fact that the system was based on certain values that furthered some interests over others…if the system was accepted as a natural phenomenon needing no explanation or justification (because it's essential rightness was so obvious), then the possibility of resistance evaporated. (Brookfield 73)

Thus, ISAs are present in theory and practice any time the interviewees talk about the importance of certain values over others. ISAs are an important concept in the discussion of any charter school because charter schools are always sponsored or chartered by another organization, group, or entity. The sponsor makes decisions about the content and

design of the charter, deciding what ideas are important to teach or reproduce. As was the case with these schools, instructors do not always agree with the goals of the charter. In one particular instance, an instructor mentioned she felt like the governing charter was "big brother" in her classroom.

# CHAPTER FOUR: LANGUAGE CHARGED BY THE FREE-MARKET METAPHOR

There are many models or metaphors for the way the education system is discussed. These models are often emblematic of the theory behind policy decisions. Some describe our education system as industrial, educating and producing children in groups. Others talk about education as a system of inquiry, a constant question being asked and investigated. Shanker used the word "laboratory" to talk about education reform. These metaphors in and of themselves mean very little. They are semantic interpretations, but these models or metaphors become important when decisions are made based on the logic of metaphors. Many proponents of charter schools explain the importance of choice in education saying,

> They [new corporate reformers] think they can fix education by applying the principles of business, organization, management, law, and marketing and by developing a good data-collection system that provides the information necessary to incentivize the workforce—principals, teachers, and students—with appropriate rewards and sanctions. (11)

Ravitch explains the detriment of this model, saying, "Market reforms have a certain appeal to some…There is something comforting about the belief that the invisible hand of the market, as Adam Smith called it, will bring improvements through some unknown force. In education, this belief in market forces lets us ordinary mortals off the hook" (11). This thinking makes us passive in the system, not in control because the market will work itself out with time. Good schools succeed. Bad schools fail.

In order for the market model to appear to work, teachers need to be assessed every 3 to 5 years so that parents can make decisions about where to enroll their children and what services to 'buy.' Often this accountability comes in the form of standardized

testing, a high stakes method that some argue does not accurately reflect quality of learning at all. This method of assessment has sparked concern among unions who worry about teacher performance being measured based on testing scores. Only "12% of charter schools are unionized" (Kahlenberg and Potter 10). This is opposed to the "60% of public school districts" that have some form of union contract (10). This has the potential to result in a decrease in teacher voice and empowerment within charter schools in order to rely on outside measures. The problem with dismantling unions is that teachers who are fearful of their coming contract renewals cannot fully engage with students in a safe environment.

Education is messy because learning requires students to make mistakes and to feel comfortable making them. Unions protect the human aspects of education. Teachers who do not live and work in constant fear for their jobs challenge students with controversial topics. They stand up for issues that matter. Studies have shown "having a strong teacher culture also improves student performance" (Kahlenberg and Potter 6). Giving teachers more power in their classrooms and in the education system is not just about health benefits and salaries. It is about decreasing turnover by supporting teacher growth. It is about treating teachers like people rather than transient resources. Supporting teacher growth makes sense when one considers:

> A study of fourth- and fifth-grade students in New York City found that students performed worse when teacher turnover within their grade-level team was higher… Notably, the harmful effects of teacher turnover were two to four times greater in schools with higher proportions of black students and low-achieving students. (Kahlenberg and Potter 7)

It seems like an easy solution. To hold teachers accountable for student performance and to penalize teachers when students aren't measuring up. This simple solution does not

take into account complex factors such as areas of high poverty and lack of available resources.

*Economy and Competition for Resources*

With or without their knowledge and/or intent, John, Mark, and Jenny described their charter programs with language charged by capitalism and the free-market metaphor. Once again, John was perhaps the most explicit. He explained that one of his goals was to teach children to understand how the economy works. He says, he teaches students "this idea of a micro-economy where they can see that their learning and their work is pivotal and that… is an idea and an activity that the greater community then sees value in, that they're actually making products and selling products to the greater community" (20 May 2014). John is direct about his desire to teach students about involvement with the community through capitalism. The consumption of products and services becomes important in his pedagogical narrative.

Mark and Jenny also talk about education in terms of capitalism. At a couple points in our interview, both Mark and Jenny discuss the literal dollars and cents behind charter programs. In my interviews, the teachers are often considered resources that enhance a product such as when one educator says that the school "cashed in our vocal music teacher, our [unintelligible] teacher, our band teacher. We took all three of those positions, we made them into one performing art teacher position" (Mark, personal interview). The use of the word "cashed" makes teachers a part of the product being sold. Teachers become a cog in the product marketed to the public. In fact, the word "purchased" was used to describe teacher services four additional times by the same

educator (17 June 2014). As previously discussed, free-market metaphors are common because greater choice is supposed to yield greater quality. The competition for resources becomes vital in this race, and teachers are just another resource like classroom space or textbook money.

In this way, the whole charter school debate is wrapped up in a market-based model, failing to take into account that not everyone has the luxury of choice. When I visited the elementary Montessori program, Mark mentioned that some parents were driving as much as 40 miles to get to the school and that no bus existed (17 June 2014). The question then becomes: who are these families that can afford to drive up to 40 miles every day and does everyone have the same freedom to make that choice? Another indication that the choice charter programs offer isn't as straightforward as it seems occurred when Mark talked about trying to add a three year-old preschool, saying,

> Right now, we're only a four and five [year-old preschool] because we didn't get approval for the three year-old because we would have to charge tuition and the school district wasn't real thrilled with us charging tuition for three year-olds. We're going to hit that back. We're going to go back to that at some point and see if we can get that through. (17 June 2014).

So if charter programs are able to charge tuition for the first initial year, the description of public education becomes more complicated. Those who can afford education will get it, and those who can't, will be behind from the first day. Those with the funds could enroll children, begging the question: how will the school account for this advantage in the following year when students are supposed to enroll in the lottery? Will students who paid tuition get preference over those who could not afford it? The narrative these educators were telling was of socioeconomic access to the school. You have agency in educational choice if you can afford it.

Allan Shanker never intended for charter schools to compete with other public schools. Shanker saw charter schools as "laboratories" for new instructional methods. He intended the successful ideas to be shared in order for differing types of instruction to support each other. In 2013, U.S. Senator Lama Alexander who is also the former U.S. Secretary of Education, said: "I still wonder why we, over time, don't make every public school a charter school… You couldn't do it all overnight, but you could do it over 20, 25 years" (qtd. by Kahlenberg and Potter 10). This sentiment isn't isolated, and it ignores the original intent of these programs.

Charter schools have been pitted against neighborhood public schools, including their host schools, in a race for dollars, building space, students, performance, and the best teachers. The Center for Education Reform says that out of the nearly 6,700 new charter school across the country, around 1,000 have been closed since 1992 (7). This means that countless children have had to start over in a new school, and that teachers like Neal—who have given up everything for the promise of freedom in the classroom—are displaced and rendered disposable.

When a school competes unsuccessfully for resources, the teachers are charged with making up the difference. Attrition rates for charter school teachers are high. According to the National Charter School Research Project, "By some accounts, charter schools lose between 20 and 25 percent of their teachers each year" (1). The study goes on to say that the number one reason charter school teachers change schools is "Lack of administrator support" followed by "Workplace conditions" (2). In contrast, the number one reason traditional public school teachers move schools is "Teaching assignment" followed by "Lack of administrator support" (2). In short, the support of administration is

important to any teacher, and its lacking seems to have a statistically significant impact on charter school teachers and, by extension, on students who need a stable learning environment. These are the resources for which charter schools compete.

On the first day of my research, Neal forgot to meet me at the front entrance of the host school. I waited with the check-in attendant. I watched the clock, wondering if I was in the right location before asking a secretary to bring me to the charter classrooms. Because the charter was embedded in a host school, the secretary didn't actually know with any certainty where it was located within the building.

Host schools are not uncommon, and neither is competition between the charter and the host district. A study conducted to pinpoint why charter programs most often close, explains that one important factor in a charter school's "survival" "may depend on how well charter schools compete with other schools, primarily those in the host school districts" (Schwenkenberg 14). My initial feeling was that Neal's charter was not competing very successfully with the host school. Tucked in a back corner, the Montessori program consisted of two multi-age classrooms and one greenhouse dome where students learned to grow organic kale and beans. The students did not mix or interact with the regular high school students although they may someday attend the host school as traditional students when they age out of the Montessori program. Most of the sources of strain in Neal's charter came from being a middle school teacher working in a host high school where the school's resources were designed for high school use. Also, charter A was founded by a group of parents, and while the host school did have a principal and administration, they were not trained charter school instructors nor did they have any of the same stake in the outcome of the school.

After my observations of charter A, I spent more than 30 hours with Neal while we planned and implemented the summer program. At the beginning of one of the camp days, he casually mentioned the stress and frustration of having to clear out his Montessori classroom. He told me that the middle school charter officially closed at the end of the year due to low enrollment. The sighs accompanying a start-up school with no buses, building, or connected neighborhood were over.

# CHAPTER FIVE: ACCESS

Even if market forces could put pressure on schools to increase education quality, the implicit passivity of this model does not do enough to encourage direct action and designation of resources for English Language Learner (ELL) and special needs students. Market models encourage schools to avoid enrolling students with additional needs as these students could potentially decrease testing outcomes, and therefore, the future enrollment for the school.

## *ESL Resources*

For the 2011-2012 school year, The U.S. Department of Education reports an estimate "9.1% or 4.4 million students" required ELL services which include English as a Second Language (ESL), High Intensity Language Training, and bilingual coursework ("Fast Facts" para 1). In the states I researched, The U.S Department of Education reports only "3-5.9%" of enrolled charter students are ELL learners ("English Language Learners" Figure 1). When I inquired about ESL services at Charter Schools A and B, the educators said that the programs did not offer resources to ESL. As per federal law, this did not mean ESL students could not enroll; it only meant the services available were limited.

## *Special Needs Resources*

Similarly, The U.S. Department of Education reports "13%" or "6.4 million" students received special needs services in a variety of school types including charters in

2011-2012 ("Children and Youth with Disabilities" para 2). The National Council for Learning Disabilities says charter schools are required to provide access to special education and services. However, as with ESL students, the National Council for Learning Disabilities has concern about a possible "underrepresentation" in charters and has requested further research (38). Of interest to this study is an investigation into the number of special needs students represented in small/rural charter programs. Because, again, while charter programs are legally obligated to provide services to students with special needs, they are not obligated or even able to offer the extent of resources often seen in larger districts.

*Access*

Access to charter schools is problematic on more than a socioeconomic level, as I came to understand from the carefully worded answers teachers gave me when discussing the enrollment of ESL and special needs students. Because charter schools like the Montessori program have limited resources and more flexibility to buy services, the schools I visited were not always serving the needs of all students.

All instructors favored the idea of smaller class sizes, but this also meant schools had less money. Educators needed to make choices between resources that make schools standout (like buying musical instruments) or dedicating funds to resources that will attract students who, Ravitch reminds, us do not score well on state tests (like hiring ESL teachers) (*Reign of Error* 55-62). As Susan says, "You want to offer something that is different and unique to parents who come and say, 'well why should I come to your school versus this one?' The problem, first of all, is that it is costly" (20 Oct. 2014).

When I asked John what his program might do if a student with special needs applied, he told me: "Yeah, for us just being so small, we do have to just say this not going work well, unfortunately" (20 May 2014). Neal told a similar story, saying, "It is a lottery system, and the one determining factor is if a student does have an IEP, is meeting with that student and the parents and special education teachers to determine if this is the best fit for them…" (20 May 2014). This same sentiment was mirrored again and again. Mark phrased it this way:

> We don't have a special education program right now here. When we moved out here, the district said we just can't afford to have special education out there. And so if we have a child that has special education, has special needs, the parents have two choices: 1.) They either say we're not going to take special education. We still want our child to come. Or 2.) They say we just can't send our child because of their, their needs and the support that they need. (17 June 2014)

Mark fails to recognize the irony of charter school B existing in a building created for the segregation of special needs students.

While none of the charter school teachers advocated excluding ESL and special needs students, the schools were often unable to meet the needs of all who applied for enrollment, effectively sending a clear message: the school's priority was not to accommodate these students. While these are the students Shanker envisioned attending charter schools, they are not the students being accommodated in the modern charter; the original purpose of charter schools has shifted in these schools.

*Exclusivity*

When I asked educators whether they felt the charter system would ever become the norm, teachers most often explained that they felt traditional public schooling has an important place in the educational system too. At one point, Mark explained that he

didn't see charter schools becoming the norm because "I kind of think it destroys the model… I mean then it just becomes like we used to be. Now everybody is a public school… I think it takes away, I mean if everybody did convert over, it would take away some of that inventiveness that charter schools have right now" (17 June 2014). Although this view doesn't offer a solution for small charter schools who cannot afford to offer ESL and special needs services, it also makes these schools an elitist institution that fails to recognize the original intent of charter programs as lab schools meant to support traditional schools.

# CONCLUSION

I set out with questions about the way teacher identity is impacted by education standards and reform in charter schools. Author of *Teacher Identity Discourses,* Janet Alsup, investigates the way teachers create narratives (which are ideological) of self-hood in the educational system. In other words, part of this investigation was how teachers either identified with or feel a dissonance with a perceived teacher identity norm (126). Alsup goes on to explain that having a stronger awareness of self, results in "more professionally satisfying personal pedagogies" (196). The educators in this study were asked to identify their personal pedagogies. Inherent in this discussion is the identification of ideological positions such as the way the educator sees themselves within the charter and how they see their personal pedagogy enacted in the charter. Here it is important to note that the nature of ideology defies self-reflection at every turn, so although educators may see themselves performing one role, they may be performing roles they do not even recognize, including the reproduction of dominant positions.

## *Shifting Power to the Learner*

At the same time educators were teaching values and using language charged by the free-market, they were often attempting to shift instructional power to the learner by avoiding direct instruction. Freire is perhaps best known for his critique of direct instruction. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire describes direct or "banking" instruction

> as [an of] act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat….the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (72)

In my observations, I saw a pedagogical practice that was closer to what Freire called "problem-posing" instruction. Many of the Montessori teachers referred to their pedagogy as inquiry-based instruction where they would let students pose questions and investigate what made them curious. This method is closer to problem-posing instruction where "the student—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (81). In Montessori classrooms, this looks like the teacher preparing the class environment in order to come up with questions to investigate.

For Freire, the personal agency required for students to investigate their own questions also gives students a sense of power and the ability to challenge the status quo and connect to the wider world (81). Instructional methods always require a careful negotiation of power but, as Freire points out, this power distribution need not be binary or absolute. We can share power, critique values, and redistribute responsibility for academic inquiry with our students. However, while teachers were trying to avoid this "banking instruction," they were not always successful shifting power to all learners, perpetuating a system of inequity for the students who needed an alternative schooling approach most.

The contradictions I observed between ideological theory and practice, charter school definition and reality, resulted in an investigation of pedagogical praxis. Educators were often not questioning the ideology behind their pedagogical choices. This resulted in contradictions.

This was true of all educators I spoke with, but it was especially true of the Montessori educators who spoke of their pedagogies using pre-determined Montessori language. There was also a difference in enrollment at the purely Montessori programs (Charters A and B). These schools were serving a population that was markedly more racially and economically homogeneous.

When speaking with each of these teachers and watching the endless patience they practiced with their students, I questioned how such good educators could vocalize so little awareness of the issues of access and ideology that contradicted their values? Why did they seem so unconcerned by the gap in charter school theory and practice?

One answer to this question might lie in these educators' shared absence of critical reflection upon the overarching dominant ideological structures at work. In other words, when a program is very clear about what it values, the 'ideal' teaching candidates are more likely to also hold those ideological positions. As Professor Mark Bauerlein explains, "… any political position that dominates an institution without dissent deteriorates into smugness, complacency, and blindness… Groupthink is an anti-intellectual condition, ironically seductive in that the more one feels at ease with compatriots, the more one's mind narrows" (qtd. in Bérubé 87). Even though Bauerlein is specifically addressing the idea that liberalism dominates public universities, the idea of homogenous ideologies resulting in "complacency" feels like a very real risk for charter school programs who strive for the same teaching method and philosophy in all classrooms.

It seems Shanker's vision for charter schools has been co-opted in more ways than one. The schools were not always serving those who needed an alternative learning

style most. They were also teaching alternative curriculum in some instances such as character values which were inherently upholding the dominant ideology, creating a system that reinforces the free-market and inequity.

*Further Research*

In future investigations, one might expand the interview process to include a larger sample size that includes more populous metropolitan regions. Although we can begin to get a picture of some of the theory and practice implemented in these charter program, they can by no means stand for charter programs across the country or even in the Midwest. In addition, future studies might collect data from a more diverse selection of programs that are completely removed from the Montessori method.

While these case studies did not focus on issues of teacher support, questions of administrative support in charter programs was lacking in more than one instance. Future studies might examine the closure rates of charter programs competing for resources in a host school. We might also ask how long the average teacher stays in a charter school as compared to a traditional school. Many of the interviewees were in the first half of their careers, and I worry about teacher burnout in cases like Neal's where the teacher must be their own support. We might also question whether commuting outside of a given neighborhood to attend a school results in more racial diversity or a return to racial and economic segregation in public schools. Lastly, we might question what happens to the students in charter programs with alternative teaching methodologies when they decide to attend a university still grounded in traditional teaching methods? Is the point of charter

schools to get students ready to succeed in any environment or to shield them from potentially challenging environments?

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# APPENDIX A

The Department of Education

Charter School Title V, Part B

How does the statute define a charter school?

Charter schools are established according to individual State charter school laws. The enactment of State charter school laws is solely a State prerogative, and the definition of a "charter school" under State law is a matter of State policy. However, in order to receive CSP funds, a charter school must meet the definition in Section 5210(1) of ESEA, which is as follows:

"The term 'charter school' means a public school that:

1. In accordance with a specific State statute authorizing the granting of charters to schools, is exempt from significant State or local rules that inhibit the flexible operation and management of public schools, but not from any rules relating to the other requirements of this paragraph [the paragraph that sets forth the Federal definition];
2. Is created by a developer as a public school, or is adapted by a developer from an existing public school, and is operated under public supervision and direction;
3. Operates in pursuit of a specific set of educational objectives determined by the school's developer and agreed to by the authorized public chartering agency;
4. Provides a program of elementary or secondary education, or both;
5. Is nonsectarian in its programs, admissions policies, employment practices, and all other operations, and is not affiliated with a sectarian school or religious institution;
6. Does not charge tuition;
7. Complies with the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;
8. Is a school to which parents choose to send their children, and that admits students on the basis of a lottery, if more students apply for admission than can be accommodated;
9. Agrees to comply with the same Federal and State audit requirements as do other elementary schools and secondary schools in the State,

unless such requirements are specifically waived for the purpose of this program [the PSCP];
10. Meets all applicable Federal, State, and local health and safety requirements;
11. Operates in accordance with State law; and
12. Has a written performance contract with the authorized public chartering agency in the State that includes a description of how student performance will be measured in charter schools pursuant to State assessments that are required of other schools and pursuant to any other assessments mutually agreeable to the authorized public chartering agency and the charter school."

# APPENDIX B

IRB approval for human research subjects.

Northern Michigan University

Office of Graduate Education and Research
1401 Presque Isle Avenue
Marquette, MI 49855-5301
906-227-2300
FAX: 906-227-2315
Web site: www.nmu.edu

**Memorandum**

**TO:** Tracy Haack
English Department

**CC:** Lisa Eckert
English Department

**DATE:** October 29, 2014

**FROM:** Brian Cherry, Ph.D. BC
Assistant Provost/IRB Administrator

**SUBJECT:** **IRB Proposal HS14-623**
**IRB Approval Dates: 10/29/2014-10/29/2015****
Proposed Project Dates: 05/01/2014-05/01/2015
"Charter Schools in a Changing Education System"

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The Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your proposal and has given it final approval. To maintain permission from the Federal government to use human subjects in research, certain reporting processes are required.

A. You must include the statement "Approved by IRB: Project # HS14-623" on all research materials you distribute, as well as on any correspondence concerning this project.

B. If a subject suffers an injury during research, or if there is an incident of non-compliance with IRB policies and procedures, you must take immediate action to assist the subject and notify the IRB chair (dereande@nmu.edu) and NMU's IRB administrator (bcherry@nmu.edu) within 48 hours. Additionally, you must complete an Unanticipated Problem or Adverse Event Form for Research Involving Human Subjects

C. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant.

D. If you find that modifications of methods or procedures are necessary, you must submit a Project Modification Form for Research Involving Human Subjects before collecting data.

E. **If you complete your project within 12 months from the date of your approval notification, you must submit a Project Completion Form for Research Involving Human Subjects. If you do not complete your project within 12 months from the date of your approval notification, you must submit a Project Renewal Form for Research Involving Human Subjects. You may apply for a one-year project renewal up to four times.

**NOTE: Failure to submit a Project Completion Form or Project Renewal Form within 12 months from the date of your approval notification will result in a suspension of Human Subjects Research privileges <u>for all investigators listed on the application</u> until the form is submitted and approved.**

All forms can be found at the NMU Grants and Research website:
http://www.nmu.edu/grantsandresearch/node/102

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