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NEIGHBORHOOD NARRATIVES: LEARNING ABOUT LIVES THROUGH CONVERSATIONS, WRITING, AND PHOTOGRAPHS

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In the suburbs, the police are much more on top of things than in the city. In Philly, they will beat you, but not in a good way. I have a girlfriend who lives in Cheltenham (a nearby suburb) and her car was stolen. They told her before she even knew it was gone! They called her in the morning and said, "We have your car. Some kids took it for a joyride." This would never happen where I live.

Our house was broken into. They took our wedding rings, Nintendo, other things. Those wedding rings were very special. We will have to save our money to get other ones.

I don't do anything in this neighborhood. Even as a child, my parents would take me out of it so that we could get things done.

This description is from a conversation I had with one of the mothers in this research study. It illustrates the way that perceptions and experiences within a neighborhood influences people's lives, identities and behavior. These families' experiences reflect the perceived opportunities and resources that are available to them. Within one neighborhood, three families have quite different perceptions and life experiences. The families I have worked with during this research study have taught me how perceptions of neighborhood has affected their lives; impinging upon their outlook, investment, and perception of their lives within an urban context. Their concerns about the community, aspirations of success, and attitudes about the neighborhood affect the level of engagement and investment in an area. The intent of this paper is to consider the links between community and schooling in one urban community. Embedded in this link between the worlds outside and within the school is the responsibility that mothers take to manage their living experiences within a neighborhood.

Theoretical Frame

Neighborhoods provide a dynamic network of connections and relationships that impact the life experiences of children, specifically their economic opportunities and educational attainment. In minority neighborhoods, especially those that are predominantly comprised of African-Americans (Cheatham & Stewart, 1990) or people of Hispanic descent (Orfield, 1993), these experiences reflect a history of discrimination, racism, and oppression (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993). Neighborhood effects may be mitigated through family choices, educational experiences and parental decisions that provide opportunities and positive outcomes for children (Furstenberg, 1993). The role of the family is an important part of a child's development (Valdes, 1996) because, "…parents play an essential role in managing the external world by monitoring, locating, and cultivating the social contacts in which their children engage outside the household (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999 p. 12)."

The understanding of how people conceptualize and understand their community context is a crucial role in examining cultural, educational, economic, and racial factors that impact their experiences (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In urban and minority neighborhoods, the impact of parenting and family support is often overlooked or viewed through a deficit lens, resulting in a one-dimensional view that perpetuates prejudicial views of minorities (McCarthy, 1998; McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000; Way, 1998). For example, family education programs that target minority parents are often implemented with the belief that parents are in need of training, yet they rarely question the effectiveness of the educational programs that misunderstand the parents' ways of knowing, communicating and learning. "What is evident, however - given the above position about the role of families in education (that they should be involved in standard ways)- is that many educators and policymakers believe that attention must be directed at educating or changing what I term here "non-standard" families, that is, families that are non-mainstream in background or orientation (e.g., nonwhite, non-English-speaking, non-middle-class) (Valdes, 1996 p. 33)."

Within my analysis of families, communities, and schools, is the impact of social capital, which affects the outcomes for children and families. Social capital relates to how parents define and interact within their community through daily activities as well as participation with other individuals and organizations. Social capital is an important consideration for how families interact within their community (Reay, 1998) because it relates to their involvement through informal and formal relationships with others (Stern & Seifert, 2001). As Clark and Ramsay (1990) state, "Social capital is comprised of the network of relationships surrounding a person. That network involves one family and the broader community of adults of which the family may be a part (p. 240)." This

implies that children's opportunities may be linked more to the way that families activate their capital through their neighborhood experience. Furthermore, the experiences and relationships of families in communities as they interact together affect the future outcomes of children.

Finally, this research includes voices of children and mothers, which are often neglected in conversations regarding urban studies and education. It is important not only understand some of the factors that impact urban children, but also examine and value the experiences of children themselves (Middlebrooks, 1998; Nightingale, 1993; Orellana & Hernandez, 1999; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991; Vernon-Feagans, 1996). This research incorporates the experiences of children along with their families in order to understand their lives within their urban context. The role of mothers is a significant aspect of this particular study because most of the research on the affects of education have focused on classroom interactions, specifically parent involvement, and have neglected both their voices and knowledge (Lareau, 1989/2000). Conversations with mothers illuminate how daily decisions and future goals affect the engagement in one particular area. It is significant to couple the perspectives of mothers and children because they reflect the impact of identity, achievement, and goals on a particular location.

Methods

This research in Elmwood Heights1 began with my work in a particular kindergarten classroom where I was researching students' responses to picturebooks. However, my own personal experiences as a teacher and observations of the students' responses led me to believe that it would be insightful to understand their life outside of the classroom. In order to understand more about the connections and experiences between schools, families, and communities, I solicited many different families to go on neighborhood walks with me. Out of many different contacts, three families agreed to participate and also showed up for our meetings. I invited both parents and any other family members to take part in the activity, in my written and spoken invitations to participate in this study. However, the parents decided that the mothers and children would participate; my only depiction of the fathers' experiences came from the mothers and children2. While the lack of father's voices is a limitation of this study, much information was gained from learning about the experiences of the mothers and children.

I collected data by conducting neighborhood walks and drives with mothers and children of three families. The interaction could be characterized as a qualitative interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) or an informal conversation between the mothers, the children, and myself (Christman, 1988). During our times together, I let dialogue flow naturally; listening carefully, and probing specific topics as they emerged from conversations. In addition, I also had several phone conversations with the parents where we talked about their lives. With all of the three families, I had met either the mother or the father prior to their participation3; in the morning as they dropped their children off at school or at a family reading day held in the fall.

As we went around their neighborhoods, the children were given cameras to photograph important landmarks and some of the families took the cameras for several days to photograph sites that were inaccessible on that particular day. After the photographs had been developed, I spent many afternoons with the children in their school context to write a book about their neighborhoods. Because the initial data focused more on the experiences of the parents, these times with the children were opportunities for the children to describe their experiences of the neighborhoods. Data included audiotapes of the neighborhood walks, fieldnotes from interactions with parents and their children, and photographs with written narratives completed by the children. The data, consisting of interviews and writing sessions with the children, were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques of establishing conceptual categories (Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Weis & Fine, 1999).

Further insight about the children, families and neighborhood came from my research relationship with the two educators in the classroom, whom I have worked with for the past 8 months. Their feedback about the community and the families of the classroom informed and affected my own work and provided a reliability check that verified my analysis through two people who were knowledgeable of the area and the students (Carspecken & Apple, 1992). In addition, our discussions created an important space for discussions related to relevant issues of this research project. One of the teachers is an African-American woman who has raised children in this community and the other woman is white and has taught in this community for ten years. Their understanding has been an important aspect of my research, embedded in my own analysis of events. I often discussed issues of race, class, and education with them that related to this research experience, theoretical readings, and classroom events. I feel that their perceptions are woven throughout my own understanding of the community, families, and children of this study.

Neighborhood Context

Elmwood Heights is a predominantly African-American community located in Philadelphia. While the community is described as middle class in many of the newspaper accounts, the particular school that I am working with qualifies for the free breakfast and lunch program because at least 65% of the children come from families who are living below the poverty level. Based on the 1990 census reports, there were 24,946 people living in Elmwood Heights; 92% are African-American and 7% are white4. One

of the main concerns of this community involves the projected population decline.

In the 1950's, Elmwood Heights began to experience a demographic shift from a predominantly white and Jewish community to an African-American community, which resulted in negative perceptions about the neighborhood. Throughout the 1980's, there were reported problems with open-air drug markets and abandoned stores, lots, and homes. The residents became concerned about the deterioration of the community, detailed as happening "overnight" (Rhor, 1996). Residents were increasingly concerned and formed several community-based organizations. A state representative founded a revitalization corporation which was given much of the credit for the rehabilitation of the neighborhoods (Edmonds, 1997). Some of the projects that the revitalization corporation has been credited with include creating an employment-training center, renovating a recreational center, and refurbishing apartments and shopping facilities. Another organization has initiated restoration of abandoned homes in the area (Edmonds, 1996) and built a shopping facility that included a mixture of retail space and low-income housing (Wallace, 1988). These initiatives have been made through partnerships between the businesses and the community members in order to create relevant resources in the community.

While the above-average home ownership and strong community involvement are important trends, the migration from Elmwood Heights has important implications for this African-American community. There are concerns about the legacy of this community and many residents want to prevent the loss of activism and cultural pride evident in many of the neighborhood initiatives and interactions. Some citizens are concerned with the increased number of abandoned houses in Elmwood Heights, drawing comparisons to the decline many years ago of areas in North Philadelphia (Gorenstein, 2001).

The role of educational institutions has been linked to the stability of Elmwood Heights. The quality of public schools is an important resource to families with school-aged children, who account for 26% of the population (Corporation, 1994). One way that community organizations have addressed this issue is through the creation of a charter school, which has an extensive waiting list due to high demand. A state representative articulated the link between school options and the neighborhood exodus in a recent interview. "It's families with kids leaving," he said, "We are in a very small way trying to address that with our (charter) school, but we can't take all the people banging on the door" (Gorenstein, 2001).

Profiles of Families

Examining the experiences and choices of families and children within this community is relevant to understanding the situation within this urban context. The conversations with families and children complicate the statistical representation uncovered by research, yet also personalize and verify some of the themes that have emerged. The next section details and describes my interactions with families in this neighborhood. The data is triangulated through the juxtaposition of neighborhood trends and individual voices.

Jones Family: Temporary Residents in Search of a 'Better' Community

The Jones family consists of Diane and Frank, the parents, Sandra, who is six, and her brother Eric, who is four. Diane is pregnant and expecting the new addition to their family in six months. The Jones' moved to the Elmwood Heights Neighborhood three years ago from a nearby community. The mother is in her mid-30's and is a stay-at-home mom and the father is a youth counselor. Sandra and her mother's community activities include: shopping for food, reading at the library, going to school and socializing with other families and the crossing guard, playing at the park, tending and adopting animals in the neighborhood, and talking to neighbors. Diane also describes the increase of outdoor activities during the summer months; children playing outside and listening for the jingle of the ice cream truck, which relieves them in the sweltering heat.

Diane and her husband came to the elementary school to meet me on the day that we had scheduled to take a walk around the neighborhood. As Diane left the school building and walked throughout the neighborhood, she was talking and exchanging information with other parents and children. As we passed the crossing guard at a nearby intersection, it was obvious from their conversation that Diana and Sandra knew the guard quite well. On our walk, Diane and Sandra took me through their neighborhood to a newly renovated seafood shop to purchase shrimp for dinner. We also walked to the library and read several children's books. Along the way, we passed several landmarks and locations that were photographed and discussed.

While Diane appreciates Philadelphia, she envisions their residency at Elmwood Heights as a temporary juncture in her family's life. She characterizes it by saying that, "…we made a pit stop in Elmwood Heights. And we hope to move in two more years." In this excerpt of our conversation, she explains to me that they hope to relocate to an African-American, middle class community on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

> And that's one of my concerns. Sometimes people do not take care of their homes. And I want to be in a

> neighborhood where they are proud and take care of things. When you move up to a different economic level, you are making an investment. The neighborhood is much better than I came from, but now it's time to make the next step.

Later in the conversation, she links her desire to move with her need for social mobility:

> I think as far as moving up, it's important not to be sedentary. And not to have a bigger mortgage bill, but just the part of being proud of the accomplishments you have. We came from (nearby neighborhood location), got married and moved from there. And then we got this house and we got a five-year mortgage. And we will own our house in two years. So, now I feel like we will have the money that has appreciated in our house. My ideal would be to find a middle class, African-American suburb on the outskirts of town. That might be impossible, but I can dream, can't I?

Diane envisions their stay at Elmwood Heights as a temporary part of her family's experience; however, her contributions to the social capital of this neighborhood are evident in many ways. This is apparent in my own observations as well as the way she describes her own interactions with neighbors and other school families. I observed an exchange where another parent approached Diane to ask about becoming a foster parent. Diane asked for her number and told her that she would call her to talk about the process. I asked her if she had been a foster parent and she responded, "No, but I just have a lot of information. By staying home, I just find out a lot of information. I talk to everybody." She illustrated her role as a resource when she explained her involvement in helping her friend find a home:

> I helped my friend get a home last year… I told her, if you live in this neighborhood, you have to have a car because you can't walk to the store. So, there's a trade off. They can't believe it. It's easy to get a home in Philadelphia. You can have bad credit and get a home in Philadelphia. I mean, I'm like… this is why I think that Philadelphia is such a great city. Even if you are poor, or if you weren't bless to have an educational know-how, you can make it here.

These two exchanges demonstrate how a stay-at-home mother, who invests in her community, is an important aspect of building social capital within the area. Through her own understanding and knowledge, this mother assists other families who need additional support and encourages friends to purchase real estate in this particular community, which she believes is a good place to start a family.

Diane had many concerns about Sandra's educational experience, which both reflected and paralleled conversations we had about the neighborhood. Many of her comments about other people in the neighborhood indicates that they are not living or acting in a way that she deems as appropriate for her family. Her concerns were clearly articulated as she told me that:

> When someone comes up to me in the cafeteria and says what a good kid Sandra is because she minds her manners, I don't think that is a complement. That is what she is supposed to do. And when I come up to the classroom and kids are hugging me even if they don't know me, I ask myself, "Are they not getting something at home?"

At the end of the school year, Diane approached the teacher regarding her concerns about the school. In a neighborhood where there is a concern with middle class flight and a high interest in public school alternatives, such as the nearby charter school, this concern about "who is attending the school" as well as the quality of the learning experience is an influencing factor of the legacy of the community. This realization that educational choice is such an important aspect of her location brings new understanding to my own understanding of school choice and vouchers. One of the factors that would prevent Diane from leaving is to feel that she had more of a choice for her children's school experiences.

The resources of the community have had a strong impact on Diane's perception of the neighborhood and motivation to leave for another location. While education is the major concern for Diane, she is also quite dissatisfied with the choices she has regarding other resources as well, including the shopping facilities in the area. In her discussion, the interconnection between these two is linked to her own ideas of what is important for her family, especially her three children. While her family shops at the local seafood shop, she voices her concern about the quality of food and also wishes for a chain grocery store where the facilities are cleaner. This is shown in the following exchange where we talked about different schools in the area:

Diane: But in this particular neighborhood, there are not that many choices.
Me: There's not?
Diane: Just like the stores. You haven't seen any stores, right?
Me: No
Diane: There you have it. It's far to get to a school. A decent school.

For Diane, the neighborhood is inadequate due to unsuitable peers, limited educational choices, and insufficient shopping facilities. These three factors contribute to her desire to leave the community.

My walk with Diane and Sandra was characterized by dissatisfaction with the neighborhood but a strong level of engagement within the community. Diane also believes in her own agency to change her personal circumstances by moving to a community more suitable to their own needs. Despite envisioning their involvement as temporary, the Jones' participation in the community is evident in a variety of ways, including moving people to the area, acting as a resource to other parents, establishing relationships with neighbors and shopping in local businesses. Observations of their social interactions indicate that they contribute to the social capital of the neighborhood with their involvement with other school families and through their own networking with friends.

Bronson Family: Suburban Identity, Urban Address

The second family who participated in my research was the Bronson family, headed by Ernest, Sr. and Lorie, who were both age 34. They have two children, Andrea, age six and Ernest, Jr., age three. Ernest, Sr. works in construction and Lorie works in the human resource department at a nearby business. For many reasons related to class and identity, this family does not support the local businesses or institutions in the community, except for the public school that the daughter attends. Lorie explained her history within the neighborhood by explaining that:

> I have lived in the neighborhood seven years. The house we are in, Ernest had that house, we'll be 34. He bought that house we are in when he was 21. He always worked in construction, always with good construction companies and it has been nice. He (her husband) bought the house, and he moved his grandparents in it. His grandparents lived in North Philadelphia and their home kept getting broken into. So he said for them to move up because he had the house, so they moved up. And then his granddad passed.

Ernest purchased his house fifteen years ago and has owned his current home for the longest period of time of these three families. Lorie told me that Ernest's mother was going to move into Elmwood Heights in a house they purchased for her on their block. The most indicative statement regarding how Lorie perceives her neighborhood was revealed during our first contact, when we were scheduling a time for our neighborhood walk, she responded:

> I mean, this neighborhood is fine. We live here mostly for financial reasons. But truthfully, I don't really walk around there. Would it be okay for us to go around in a car? Even as a child, my parents used to take me out of the neighborhood to get things or do things.

This statement seems to indicate an intergenerational pattern of disinvestment in community resources and locations, as exemplified in her family interactions. This is further reflected through the conversations with their daughter Andrea, who indicated that she is unfamiliar with many local landmarks, businesses, and institutions within walking distance of her house.

Lorie described how she often leaves Elmwood Heights to go to what she considers more "preferable" communities in the city or neighboring suburbs. As we drove through the large homes of this area, Lorie, Andrea, and I marveled at their size and the space of their yards. The contrast between the community in which they lived and the places they went to for errands and shopping was striking. Our drive began with smaller rowhouses that mirrored their own home, in different levels of disrepair and quickly changed to immense detached homes with large manicured lawns. Lorie's orientation of our location in the city was also telling of how she viewed areas we had driven through. She told me that, "We are still in the city, but this is the (different) area. It's a little better out here because real estate is a little higher than in the city." This statement reflects her understanding that within the city's more affluent neighborhoods, as well as neighboring suburbs, there are communities that are more congruent with her lifestyle and identity. These areas that she often frequented are quite different than the area in which she lived, which was one reason for her disengagement in the area surrounding her home. This is further illustrated as she describes her choices

for bringing her children to a playground outside of the community:

> They go to the playground. It's straight up that way. And then you make a right on this street. A lot of parents from all over bring there kids there because it's cleaner. In the city, the playgrounds are fine, but you have to scoop up the glass and I don't have time to scoop up the glass and cracked bottles! So, we take them out.

Lorie's concept of neighborhood illustrates an "unbounded community" (Scherzer, 1992) that encompasses locations beyond the school intake area and decidedly excludes many of the places that are familiar to the other families of this study. Her rationale for choosing locations away from her home is to access better facilities and resources. Our conversations reveal her perception that along with higher real estate prices, there were better facilities; including grocery stores, public playgrounds and libraries, and shopping areas. However, the Bronson Family does not view these locations as attainable neighborhoods for their own living. Unlike the Jones family, Lorie did not consider that living in another community was an option available to her. This was particularly interesting because this is the only family in our study where both parents are working.

Lorie's experience where her house was broken into and many precious belongings were stolen, detailed at the beginning vignette of this paper, reflects and explains her disassociation with the area around her home. Lorie's personal experience, as well as her knowledge attained from friends and family, reinforced a mistrust of neighbors and law enforcement in Philadelphia. However, in the suburbs, her perception is that "people are more on top of things" and "things are better". She chooses to define her community not by vicinity or location, but by seeking out better security and resources. She told me that she actually knows who broke into her house, but felt that there was nothing she could do about it except to save money to replace the objects.

Education is an important aspect of the Bronson's lives and Andrea's school is the only local institution in which they are involved. Lorie described the process of enrolling her daughter into the public elementary school in which she currently attends:

> What happened was I was trying to get Andrea into a charter school. We wanted to put her in private, but we couldn't afford it. So, we tried to get her in charter school, but they picked children through a lottery. So, two charter schools, they picked her, but she was always number 63 or number 1000. The just never took her. Then I met (a teacher from the school). I knew her from my old neighborhood. She told me about the elementary school. And so I got her in there. I just hope that when she is in first grade that she can get a really good teacher. The teacher I know in the school said she would try to help me. Kind of guide me through each grade to let me know what teacher to select.

Lorie's attempt to enroll her child in a nearby charter and the long waiting list reflects the demand of alternatives to traditional public schools in this neighborhood. In addition, it illustrates the concerns about this particular school, which have been reiterated by several mothers (not participating in this study) during casual conversations with me in the school building. When Lorie realized that her economic limitations prevented her from enrolling Andrea in private school, applying to the charter school was the next option to ensure that her child receives a good education. Her third choice, which was to find a nearby public school, occurred after activating social capital and contacting a person she knew from her childhood to find an effective teacher.

This neighborhood drive was characterized by Lorie's desire to find better resources away from the surroundings of her home. While their daily activities would seem to indicate that she would seek to leave the neighborhood, her economic limitations, her satisfaction with the elementary school, and familial ties seem to support her stay in the neighborhood. From the outset, I felt that Lorie's interactions with her surrounding area were the most conflictual because she did not participate in many daily activities within walking distance of her house. However, I began to understand that her definition of community was a result of reconceptualizing what community is in order to provide her family with the best opportunities.

Decisions within the Bronson family also illustrate that community disengagement can occur in a variety of ways and adds a new perspective to Wilson's (Wilson, 1987) notion that a community can become destabilized when middle-class families leave urban neighborhoods. This family's patterns allude to the fact that a community can be affected by members who reside in a location, yet choose to not participate within its economic structures. Lorie chose to attend church, consider a university, play at playgrounds, and read at libraries away from her home, displacing social capital from this particular area. She navigated her experiences within this neighborhood by driving, yet does not foresee having the economic resources to "move up" to another area as the Jones family did.

Anderson Family: Race, Identity, and Neighborhood Conflicts

Karla, who is 41, grew up in another neighborhood in the city. Her husband is originally from the Elmwood Heights neighborhood. She has lived in Elmwood Heights for the past 10 years and the family plans to stay in the area. Karla is pleased with the community and envisions staying there on a long-term basis. She feels that Philadelphia offers many opportunities for her husband's economic advancement that he is unable to attain in other locations. For a few years, her husband relocated to South Carolina and then returned because he had better occupational and economic opportunities in this area.

Karla is one of the few Caucasian parents in the school and her husband is African-American. Karla dropped out of a nearby university and worked on a mainframe computer system at a warehouse where she met her husband. Later, she was laid off because that company merged with a larger one; however, her husband still continues working at the same company. Like Diane, Karla has established a network with neighborhood children and families because she is a stay-at-home mom. She mentioned to me that she had begun informally watching the children of parents who worked within her community. Her desire to start childcare is due to the financial constraints she had experienced. She asked me several questions about certification for childcare providers and brainstormed some ways to begin a business during our walk.

Karla met me inside the school building at the end of the school day. She and her two youngest sons were standing in the school entrance among a sea of students moving among the hallway, buying pretzels from a vendor, shoving each other to get out of the front door or inside the auditorium, or standing to wait for friends or family. As we walked out of the school building, she spoke to several parents. Even along the neighborhood walk, she talked to adults and children on the street - some she obviously knew and others she was just friendly to. Our first stop was a historical memorial cemetery, where Emmett and his brothers enjoy playing and riding their bikes through the paths, trees, and open areas. We spent a while here as the kids read the tombstones, looked for animal nests, climbed trees and stood under the large white gazebo. After the cemetery, we went to the ice rink up the street to take pictures of people playing ice hockey. The ice rink is in a recently renovated recreational center. From there, we walked to a nearby playground where the brothers often play. Finally, as the family walked me back to the bus stop, they photographed their street sign and a boat that Emmett often looks at near his house.

When Karla discussed her experience in Elmwood Heights, her description of neighborhood life seemed conflictual in some ways. For example, when I asked about crime in the area, Karla describes hearing gunshots at night on the next street. She is concerned and therefore avoids the areas that were reported to have violent occurrences. She explains that, "It's (the neighborhood) not bad. And, you know, everyone's nice around here. It's not a bad place to live. I just don't walk on the other street. I haven't heard anything lately. I don't know why, I just don't walk there."

During our walk, I noticed that Karla's perceptions of race and class seemed rather contradictory despite the fact that she seems content living in her community. During our walk, she made several racialized stereotypes about African-American people that could be interpreted as prejudicial. For example, as we were walking into the ice rink, a black male who was probably an older teenager, walked by with a pit bull tied to a large chain. She spoke to him saying, "I've never seen a chain that big!" He barely acknowledged her and kept walking. She said to me, "I just don't get black people. I'm married to one, but sometimes I just don't get them."

My interactions with Karla were not extensive enough to accurately assess whether she harbored feelings of racism or was talking about race in a way that seemed harsh or caustic. My own hesitation to interpret this statement illustrates the need to delve further into the impact of race within this neighborhood, which could result from further involvement with these families and within this community. In a meeting with fellow colleagues who are conducting community-based research in urban settings, Karla's statement evoked a passionate discussion related to the implications of her statement, which led to further speculation about her and her children's identity. Specifically, what are the implications of a white parent raising children with African-American heritage, who "doesn't get black people"? What are the consequences of a white woman living in a highly segregated African-American community who seems to segregate her own identity, despite her marriage into an African-American family? In addition, the impact of my own identity as a white woman is relevant to my conversation with Karla and affects my own interpretations of the event. However, when I asked the teachers I have worked with over this school year who have extensive experience within this community, they were just as puzzled and concerned about the implications as I was. Their interpretations mirrored my own thoughts and led me to believe that the only way to understand the ramifications of Karla's statements was to have more extensive interactions with her different contexts.

Despite the concerns I have about interpreting Karla's thoughts, her statement alludes to another type of community disengagement that could impact the investment in the school and relationships within the classroom. While Karla does not express outright disapproval for community members, she almost seems to compartmentalize herself from the rest of the community based on racial identification. During my interactions with the children, I learned that Emmett identifies himself as white. This discovery further complicated my own questions regarding the influence of race on the Anderson family's interactions within this community: Is Emmett's identification as white rather than black a conscious choice on his mother's part as a result of her prejudicial feelings? Or is it a reflection of his affiliation with his mother? What does this say for her interactions with her community, which is mostly African-American?

Writing Up Neighborhood Stories

For many afternoons, the children in this study were excused from naptime to go to the library in the basement of this school to write stories about their photographs. They enjoyed the individualized attention and opportunity to socialize and I learned much about their own experiences within Elmwood Heights. Our conversations were circular, playful and humorous; they veered from imaginary worlds, favorite books, school perceptions, and family and community life. For the three children, their lives with their family included spending time at the playground, reading at the library, shopping for groceries, and interacting with family and friends in various locations important to their daily lives. Some important findings occurred related to their lives as they wrote the book about their neighborhood that extended my understanding of where they live in significant ways.

Conversations with Emmett and Sandra, who walked through the neighborhood, demonstrate that their conceptualizations of neighborhood overlapped and intersected. This was evident from the beginning of my data collection, where the children actually saw each other during the neighborhood walks. Although Emmett and Sandra do not play together, they recognize similar places that they frequent with their families. As they shared their pictures, they also realized that they had photographed some of the same locations from different perspectives.

Emmett and Sandra constructed a larger understanding of their neighborhood through writing and discussing about their photographs. This is particularly evident in the following exchange, which occurred as Emmett held up one picture and described it to us. Prior to this conversation, the two children were comparing how pictures of nearby places.

> Emmett: That's close to my house. Sandra, the Chinese Restaurant is here and then you make a right to go to your house. You live over here?
> Sandra: I do!
> Emmett: The store is over here! I forgot it was like that.
> Sandra: Oh my gosh. That's right by where I live!
> Emmett: I took this picture because I always see that boat right there.
> Sandra: Yep, because I have a boat right on my street. And I know where his house is and he knows where my house is. So, maybe I could come over to play!

Within this same conversation, the children shared that they both frequented many local establishments. These children's points of view converged through the visual display and conversations regarding the photographs; thus reflecting the commonalties they share by living in one particular area, frequenting local places, and walking around the neighborhood on a regular basis.

The connections made by the students could potentially illustrate one way that schools could contribute to the social capital of the neighborhood. Sandra and Emmett discovered that they live near each other through this writing activity. They now have an interest in playing together, which could potentially influence their parents to develop contact between the families. While their parents are familiar with each other already, the event of actually scheduling activities together could potentially create a more familiar relationship between the two mothers. This connection, which occurred at school, has the implications for building relationships outside of the school.

Using photographs to write about their daily activities allowed them to combine their everyday knowledge with the literacy event of discussing and writing stories. This led to a deeper understanding of how writing and talking about the photographs of the places in their neighborhood were a reflection of their identities and an expression of family life. I was impressed at Emmett's demonstrated visual and spatial sophistication as he explained relationships of places in the photographs and Sandra's efforts to create community connections, which mirrored her mother's willingness to support other parents or neighbors. This representation of knowledge would not have occurred unless we had been writing about aspects from their everyday knowledge. There are many studies that look at ways to connect the knowledge of the outside world with school curriculum; writing and photographs provided one way for this to occur for very young children.

The intergenerational learning between children and parents is evident with all three of these children in different ways. Sandra shows how she valued social interactions with neighbors, learning from her mother's investment with the people whom she encountered in her community. Emmett exhibits an understanding of the neighborhood establishments and institutions, which are important aspects of his family's everyday life. Andrea is unfamiliar with local establishments including the library, grocery, playground, and recreation center. This further illustrates the importance of including children's voices in this study, as well as other community research. The patterns and knowledge these children hold will impact this neighborhood in the future. Learning about and developing their community is truly a long-term investment that should be paramount to the concerned citizens who want to prevent flight from Elmwood Heights.

Conclusion

These case studies of three families paint very different pictures of the experiences and ideas of what it means to live in one urban area. This study indicates the importance of understanding the experiences of children and families on a larger scale, a concern also echoed by many other researchers (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Cheatham & Stewart, 1990; Clark & Ramsay, 1990; Furstenberg, 1993, 1994; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Herman, 2000; Nightingale, 1993; Rogers, Tyson, & Marshall, 2000; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Vernon-Feagans, 1996). However, the tangible links between this understanding of families and children needs to be explored further within the context classroom learning and educational research.

There is a wide range of research in the field of education and sociology that considers the impact of culture, race, and class as it is contextualized within community knowledge. Some researchers acknowledge the relevance of learning about the community, as well as the culture and identities of the children (Purcell-Gates, 1995) and others explore how identities are reflected in literate events that include writing, speaking, talking, and reading (Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1982; Schaafsma, 1993). Researchers have urgently called for a connection between community and school interests as well as a critical understanding of the power structures at play between the two (Ayers, 1996; Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1993; McCarthey, 1997; Rogers, 2000; Way, 1998). These studies recognize the importance of the sociocultural forces as significant aspects of community participation, but primarily focus on observations within the classroom or focus on descriptions that are not formulated from the community members themselves.

From my own scholarly and professional work within the field of education, I believe that research that considers families' experiences within the urban community has implications for school reform, teacher practices, and student learning. Many of the concerns these parents have about their community are reflected in their perceptions of the schools. For some parents, an effective school can anchor a family to an area and increase their engagement with local people and institutions. As Michelle Fine (1993) states, "...it is not enough for families to become more like schools; schools and districts must become more like families (p. 8)". I would broaden this notion of families to include the context of where families live and the impact of their location on life opportunities.

The role of social and cultural capital is very important to the interactions and behaviors that I observed as I interacted with families in this study. The relationships and networks that were created among parents through their interactions around the school were significant. During the study, I left the school building with the parents during several instances and was amazed at the interactions that occur before and after school. I would recommend that the school work to encourage these connections and linkages with the families in their educational community. Parents can be important resources for each other and the support families receive from informal networks can increase their investment in the community.

My work with these families only scrapes the surface of many issues that are complex and multifaceted. The findings of this study point to the need for incorporation of more voices, experiences, and perspectives on how communities and schools impact and affect experiences of families. My own research design was limited by the access I had to families. While this study would have been more thorough if I had been able to interact with more families and include the perspectives of fathers, the conversations I had with these three children and their mothers illuminated many aspects related to their experiences in the community and in schools. Further conversations would provide a more complete picture of connections between life inside and outside of school. This article represents one way of learning about urban communities by incorporating the voices of those who live there. As Lightfoot (1978) states, "In order to understand the complex narrative of family-school relationships we must recognize the *interaction* of forces and consider the voices, perspectives, and actions of the excluded and ignored groups (p. 37)." I hope to add to the dialogue about the impact of different spheres of understanding for children and families. Furthermore, as an educator, my goal is to begin conceptualizing and implementing actions that link the two in order to benefit children.

Comment on this article

Notes

1 All names and places have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.
2 I was not involved in the decision of whether the fathers would participate, all three of the mothers described my research as a "school project". I wondered if this affected their decision to be involved. The idea that mothers usually take most of the responsibility for school experiences is well-documented in research (Lareau, 1989/2000, 1996).
3 Other families were solicited for this study, but did not agree to participate or did not meet me on our agreed upon time.
4 These figures are based on 1990 Census information at www.census.gov.

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