AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY: CAN STUDENTS IN A LARGE INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOL FIND BENEFITS IN A SMALL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

by

VICTOR HUGH LITTLES

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This dissertation has been accepted for
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Lee Mahon, EdD, Committee Chair

Committee:

Kitty Kelly Epstein, PhD, Research Faculty
Szabi Ishtai-Zee, PhD, Faculty Reader
Karen Bohlke, EdD, Student Reader
Karen Teel, EdD, External Examiner

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
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AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY: CAN STUDENTS IN A LARGE INNER-CITY HIGH SCHOOL FIND BENEFITS IN A SMALL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

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Abstract

This research was designed as an autoethnographic study using the researcher's own reflections, observations, and experiences to determine if smaller high schools are better for inner-city students than a large high school learning environment. Autoethnography is increasingly used as a research method, pushing the boundaries of qualitative inquiry by focusing on a phenomenon in the life of the researcher as the central aspect of study (Fetterman, 2010). Based on interviews, student and teacher surveys, and personal journals and diaries, the study focused on my work as a teacher in a large inner-city high school in a California school district**.** The large high school was converted to three smaller schools in 2003. Told in vignettes that describe my perceptions and the perceptions of the other participants in my study regarding the conversion from large to small schools, selected stories document the factors that led to my conclusions. The key issue in this study, then, involved the perception of the stakeholders as to whether small schools were more advantageous for student success.

My study revealed some interesting facts about small schools. Small schools foster closer relationships between the adults and students and among the students themselves. As a result, students feel more engaged with the school community, and these close relationships are accompanied by greater mutual respect. It seems that it is difficult to be abusive to others who you know and value which the students themselves recognized.

For years, before the implementation of the small school concept, Clark High School's campus was riddled with crime. The student body lived in California, in an area plagued with violence and poverty and all the social ills that accompany this environment. Safety has always been an issue for parents, teachers, and students. I have clearly demonstrated that, when it comes to small schools, students in urban areas benefit from a safer environment. For example, I did not witness the number of fights or shootings that I did when Clark was a large school. Also, after Clark High School converted into three small schools, there was a decrease in student suspensions.

Key Words: Autoethnography
Small School Concept
Vignette

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Last but not least, I owe my loving thanks to my parents, Vicky and Willis, to my sisters and brothers and their families, Carl, Pamela, Gayve, Keith, Kevin, Tara, and Leslie, my Aunt Jessie Littles, and to my loving nieces and nephews.

Dedication

I am dedicating this dissertation to my family for showing their unconditional support. I thank them for giving me a chance to prove and improve myself through all my walks of life. I am honored to have them as my family. I also want to dedicate this to my sister, Tara Cleveland, who inspired me to continue my education. RIP

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

In the fall of the year 2001, I arrived as an open-minded, young, and eager new teacher, ready to give back to my community, and to create a positive and safe learning environment for a group of high school students in a large California school district (60,000 to 75,000 students). I recall receiving a phone call from the district office by a woman indicating that I was to report the following Tuesday for 'duty.' My immediate reaction was, "Why is she using the word duty"? She went on to explain that I would be working at Clark High School (fictitious name), starting in the fall of 2001. There was a brief moment of silence and I had the feeling that she anticipated that I was about to say, "Thanks, but no thanks." Rather, the only thing that came to my mind was, "Is there any other school I can be assigned to other than Clark?" She responded with a harsh, "You either want the job or you don't."

Walking in the front door of Clark High School the following Monday, I was reminded of a school that was once known for its excellent academic program, high graduation rate, and outstanding teachers. Yet, for the last couple of decades, it had reversed the trend and now seemed to be recognized more for its low test scores, high drop-out rate, low teacher retention rate, low attendance record, and to its discredit, the most violent campus in the school district.

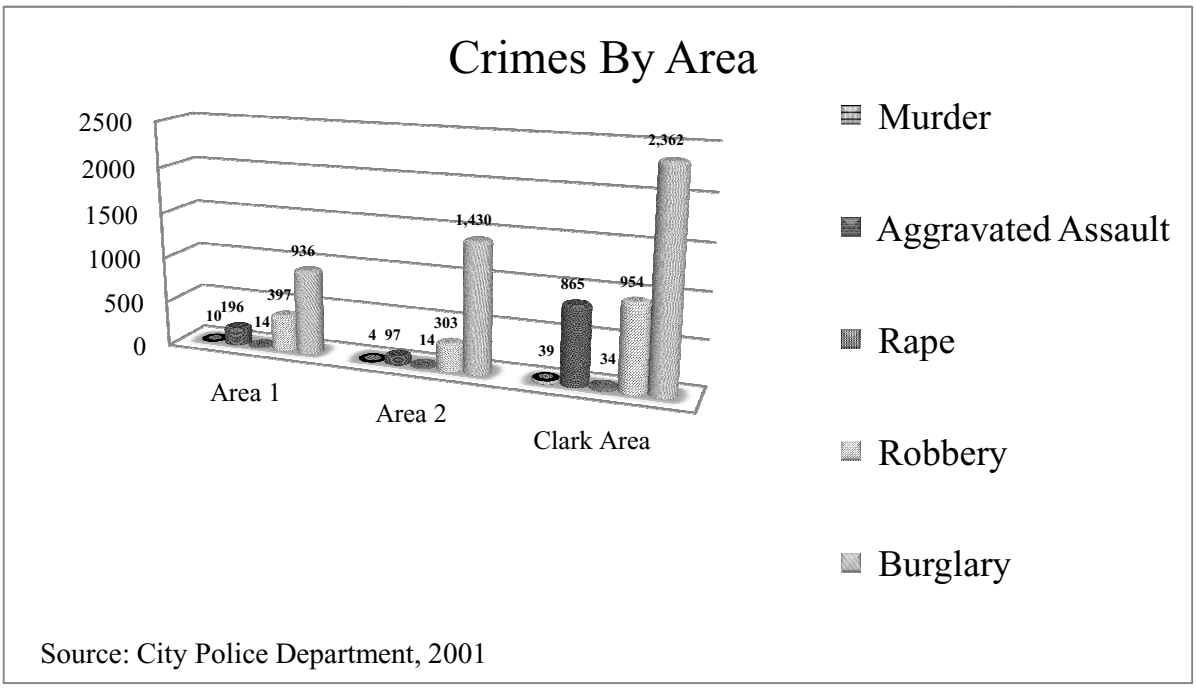
Walking into the front office, I saw long lines of students trying to register and teachers looking for their classes. Once at the counter to obtain my assignment for the day, I was prepared to be told to report to a specific classroom for an all new teachers' orientation, normal in most school districts. Instead, I was given a paper with an assignment to teach an

Advanced Placement Course in History and directions on where the assignment was located Portable 8. When I found Portable 8, students were already inside with an adult who I thought was a teacher standing in front of the class. The moment I walked in, he picked up his things and on his way out the door, looked at me and said, "Good luck."

There were approximately 15 students, sitting and standing around the room, 30 desks, no roll sheet, no textbooks, and within 15 minutes of being in the classroom, I wanted to follow the gentleman who had just walked out. It was an incredible first day for a new teacher with books thrown at me, spitballs tossed, and my head becoming a target for students who armed themselves with chalk and chalkboard erasers.

When I first started, Clark High School had a population of 1,600 to 1,700 students. The school was attended primarily by Latino and African American students and had a high drop-out rate. The immediate area surrounding the school was entangled in drugs and a high crime rate in addition to a high teenage pregnancy rate. At that time, the neighborhoods in which the Clark High School community was situated had a higher crime rate than the city as a whole (Figure1).

Figure 1.



Source: City Police Department, 2001

Crimes by area.

For my first 2 years at Clark High School, I was hired to participate in the Substitute Teacher Incentive Plan (STIP). The STIP substitute teachers work fulltime at specific school sites. STIP substitutes are hired by the school sites and fill in for the first absent teacher at their school site each day. When no teacher is absent, the principal assigns STIP substitutes additional instructional duties, including providing one-on-one and small group instruction and releasing teachers for peer observation and assisting in classrooms.

In exchange for a full-time commitment, STIP substitutes receive $138 per day, health benefits, and 5 paid sick days per year, accumulating one sick day for every 2 months of work.

Teaching is one of the few professions that requires a replacement when absence occurs in order for the job to still be accomplished. As with any other professions, teachers too have a need to be absent from time to time. Because teacher absences can be

costly to school districts, my district decided to implement attendance incentives such as STIP, to increase staff attendance and bring consistency to the classroom (Black, 2009; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vidgor 2009; Freeman & Grant, 1987; Rogers & Vegas, 2009).

I was a substitute teacher serving every day for the entire period of the STIP contract and was required to report daily to an assignment of any grade level or subject area. I had to possess or be eligible for a regular California teaching credential, authorizing service in grades K-12, or I had to have an emergency 30-day teaching permit. I was also required to work every instructional day as assigned on a day-to-day or long-term basis, where I had to sign a temporary contract designed specifically for this purpose, as well as participating in district and /or school site in-services as assigned.

As there were many classes that did not have a teacher at Clark High School, I taught United States Government, English, Algebra 1, Student Leadership, and Journalism/Yearbook. As described by the criteria above, Clark High School could definitively be identified as a dysfunctional school that needed major changes. During this period, as a teacher working at Clark, I witnessed teacher and student fear and apathy along with student behavior disintegration. There were times when teachers had little support and would leave their jobs in the middle of the school year, making it necessary to hire ill-prepared substitute teachers.

Due to the dysfunctional environment of the original large Clark High School, student test results had worsened dramatically over the years (California Department of Education, 2003-2004). In the 2005-2006 school years, the district used the California High School Standard Exam to test high school students' skills in English Language Arts and Mathematics. In 2005 only 37% of the students at Clark High School were proficient in

English Language Arts (California Department of Education, 2005-2006). Student test results in Mathematics were slightly better, with 41% of the students scoring at a proficient level (California Department of Education, 2005-2006). Change was needed.

Based upon the definition of chaos, "a condition or place of great disorder or confusion, a disorderly mass, a jumble" (Merriam-Webster, 2011, p. 356), Clark High School had a larger than normal group of students confused and disoriented, and there I was determined to bring order out of chaos. The image being portrayed was reflected in the manner in which the entire campus had been managed for decades. What I observed was that students did not have qualified teachers to teach the subject matter. I learned that some of the teachers were long-term substitute teachers who came from environments quite different from the environment at Clark High School. A long-term substitute teacher is one assigned to a particular class due to the long-term absence of the regular teacher (e.g., pregnancy leave). In my personal observation they lacked classroom management skills and were intimidated by aggressive students. As a result, only half of the long-term substitutes ever returned after the winter break. As a result of this unforeseen teacher shortage, problem resolution often involved combining two classes of students into one – thus an enrollment of 50 or more was common.

Then, there were the teachers who had been teaching at Clark High School for years. Based on conversations and research, I learned that most had experienced all types of district-mandated pedagogical changes. They had a distrust of anyone who wanted to make changes. They were content with the way that the campus had been managed in the past and, backed by a strong union, these veteran teachers thwarted efforts of anyone who would

come in and attempt to make changes to the existing system. They believed that the system was working for them, even if it was not working for the students.

Over the years, in urban high schools, an unacceptable number of students have graduated ill-prepared (Kozol, 1991; Lochner & Moretti, 2006). These schools are generally large, with a majority of Black and Latino students with test scores below the national average, and with rare exception, over-crowded classrooms with less than 64% of all students graduating (Lochner & Moretti, 2006).

Since Clark High School struggled with many of the same issues as the other urban high schools described above, and, as I became more familiar with Clark's specific problems, I came to the realization that Clark was destined to go through some very fundamental changes. The high school model that it was guided by was designed over 100 years ago and never meant to help all students, especially the socially and economically disadvantaged student, students of color, and students whose first language is not English. Over the years, the model has been typically geared toward the more affluent communities where the textbooks, curriculum design, and pedagogy are more relevant to this student population (Epstein, 2012; Freire, 1970/1993; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

As the reputation of Clark High School began to get the attention of philanthropic organizations, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offered my district a start-up grant to convert Clark High School into three small, individual schools and offered the services of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) to facilitate the conversion. In 2000, BayCES partnered with my school district and a local community organization to write and implement a small schools policy.

The New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS) movement was initiated by parents, teachers, and activists, committed to improving education in the city, which had a long history of poor urban school conditions including high dropout rates, school overcrowding and violence, and teacher turnover. No new school had been built in this city in the 30 years before this policy was passed. These egregious conditions prevailed in the mostly Black and Latino flatlands, while high-quality schools served the mostly White hills.

According to studies that were being conducted around this time, conversions from one large high school (4,500 to 6,000) to smaller schools (400 to 600) within the larger high school were taking place around the country with much success (Cushman, 1999; Fine & Somerville, 1998; Wasley et al., 2000;). To me, this was the "miracle" that could help restore Clark High School to its representation back to a great school.

The original plan in the NSAS policy was to create 10 new small schools, but the reform accelerated when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made large grants totaling $40 million to support the small school reform (other national and mostly local funders joined forces). It was at this time that the district was taken over by the California Department of Education because of a district fiscal crisis. A state administrator replaced the superintendent, and plans were made to convert several comprehensive high and middle schools into small schools sharing the old campuses – a school within a school concept (Rogers & Vegas, 2009).

Shortly after the award was granted, staff were notified of the possible award from the new principal, Ms. Knew (fictitious name), who announced that within the next 3 years Clark High School would change from a large student body population into three small schools, the population not to exceed 400 students in each school.

The reaction from the staff was mixed. Most teachers were against the changes because they felt that money would not be available after the conversion took place, and the school district would not be able to sustain the small school model after the award money was gone, especially the administrative costs that added two administrators, with estimated annual salaries of $105,000 for each administrator. Instead of converting to the three small school models, the teachers argued that there was a need for more resources for the larger school, particularly financial resources that would pay for salaries, tutors, books, and other supplies which they were sure could help the overall success of the school. All that being said, and with teacher opposition, Clark High School converted to three small, autonomous schools. Personally, I favored the small school conversion and worked very hard to try to convince my colleagues of the advantages, which I felt were many.

At the end of my third year at Clark and before the conversion described above took place, the school was forced to consolidate its staff. A vice principal, some teachers, and some classified staff were laid off. The new principal, Ms. Knew, had indicated that for the next school year there was a need to fill the "holes" that were left due to the lay-offs with no new hires. She explained that during the former school year there were many students absent from school and roaming the halls, and there were few student activities on campus, challenges that had to be faced immediately.

Because of these challenges and my support for the new program, I was offered a position in which I would monitor student attendance, coordinate parent involvement, and assist with discipline and student leadership in one of the small autonomous schools. The job that was created for me was titled "Parent/Community Liaison."

During the next 6 years (2004-2010), when Clark High School was converted into three small schools, my duties as Parent/Community Liaison evolved into the unofficial role of Dean of Student Services. My first order of business, with the help of the principal of the school in which I was working, was to change the dangerous campus climate by "taking back the school." Even today I am not sure of what the principal meant by that term, but in my mind "take back the school," meant to change the culture and the environment with my role defined as one who would work with students, teachers, and parents to create a safe and achievable learning environment. Thus, the initiation of my study where my strategy would be to look into changes in organizational structure, culture, size, and complexity through the eyes of students, teachers, and parents.

As such, my first strategy was to apply for a grant to pay teachers to do home visits with the objective of building a better relationship between the teachers and parents and between the students and teachers. An application to the Nell Soto Program found Clark High School approved for implementation of the program designed to provide resources and encouragement for teachers who truly believed in parent partnership as a strategy for raising student achievement. In order for a school to receive state funding for the Nell Soto program, a member of the school/community had to write the grant. The Request for Proposal required documentation that at least 50% of the teaching staff and 50% of the parents of enrolled children support the program. Therefore, all schools that submitted proposals had the buy-in of approximately 50% of the adult members of the school/community.

My second strategy was to identify gang members on campus and to create an intervention program for the members and their parents. I invited the Gang Task Force from

the Police Department, an attorney from the County District Attorney's Office, a Catholic priest, and a family therapist from the city's Children's Hospital to meet with a group of students and teachers. I specifically requested this group to introduce them to the community and speak to the students and parents about support and intervention.

Purpose of the Study

From the time I started teaching at Clark, I had observed drive-by shootings, stabbings, and frequent assaults on students and staff, giving me purpose for wanting to do something. Included in that something, it seemed appropriate to share the stories, the research, the strategies, the performance and outcomes with education and educators. Working with mentors and advisors, I chose to do an autoethnographic study by means of self-discovery as recognized by Chang (2008) who stated, "this form of research is useful for practitioners who do not support the single theory of one truth" (p. 12). Self-discovery in a cultural sense is intimately related to understanding others, the others being members of one's own community (i.e., students, teachers, parents, and the school community at large).

The purpose of my research was to study the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents as to the conversion of one large urban high school to three smaller high schools and if small schools build better relationships among students, teachers, and parents. The answers were to be found in improving student achievement and the overall school environment, student behavior, and even student pride with the premise that small schools build better relationships among students, teachers, and parents.

From the beginning, I believed it was time for a drastic change in the structure of the system, but it was not clear to me yet that the small school model was the answer. According to Darling-Hammond (2002), "Small is not synonymous with successful. There

are ineffective small schools, some of which replicate the very problems they were seeking to solve. Small size is a necessary condition for effective schooling, but it is not enough" (p. iii). The small high school in which I was assigned would be the laboratory from which I gathered the data for my study.

Significance

The significance of my study of larger versus small in relation to academic achievement, while relevant across many fields of business and industry, becomes most effective in education when matched with experiences from one's own life and work. Considering and analyzing personal situations resulting in the development of concrete concepts and values associated with a real-life application can lead to innovative breakthroughs (Chang, 2008).

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Due to the vast complexities of today's schools, understanding mulitple perspectives can serve to improve decision making and problem solving capabilities . In our modernistic world we focus on how to help the institution become more effective and efficient through the application of infrastructue and structure as measured by small versus large. Conversely, educators and parents focus on the people in the institution as a community of relationships by continually seeking new ways or strategies to ensure a successful future (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). This is how I saw my role in influencing the way an institution, be it a school or a district, should be designed, structured, developed, and managed to meet the needs of its clientele – the students.

I chose autoethnography for my study, using narrative research with selected vignettes that allows for increased emphasis on reflection, self-study, and decision-making. Similarly, autoethnographic research uses self-observation and reflective investigation in the context of fieldwork and writing (Marechal, 2010, p. 43). Autoethnography, unlike ethnography, is using oneself as the primary subject of research by writing personal narratives – it is "part auto or self and part ethno or culture" (Ellis, 2004, pp. 31-32).

Autoethnography combines cultural analysis and interpretation through vignettes, with narrative detail. Narrative research can help to describe the lives of individuals through history and research leading to storytelling and written words in the form of vignettes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Typically, narrative research focuses on gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting experiences, observations, and discussing the meaning of those experiences (Criswell, Locke, & Beaulieu, 2003).

Vignettes are important to my study, in order to increase understanding of important social issues related to my stories and experiences, in addition to the stories and experiences of people with similar backgrounds (Reed-Danahy, 1997). This view defines my version of culture and forms the ideology of autoethnography (Chang, 2008). "Using autoethnography not only allows researchers to understand themselves, but also to understand others from the same cultural backgrounds" (Chang, 2008, p. 19).

Small and Large

The practice of theorizing and blending the many perspectives of a large urban high school has given way to new contemporary approaches to how a small urban high school can be designed, structured, developed, and managed. Several studies have been conducted and reports have been written about the advantages of small schools versus large schools a large school enrollment of 5,000 or more and a small school enrollment of 400 to 500; (Nygreen, 2013; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2000; Southworth, 2003).

Fine and Somerville (1998) collected data from researchers and teachers in small schools on the benefits of small schools for students. They pointed out that "When done well…small schools can be remarkable for improving the intellectual and social life of children, youth, educators, and parents. Successful small schools provide an educational environment where all students can achieve at high levels and where staff have exciting opportunities to teach and learn. Successful small schools can be a systematic strategy for inciting momentum into urban school reform" (p. 104).

Cushman's (1999) study covering small urban elementary schools that had been converted from larger schools concluded that "when it comes to learning outcomes for

students, especially for students of color and those from low-income families, smaller appears better, safer, and more likely to narrow the so-called achievement gap" (p. 41).

A comprehensive study conducted by Wasley et al. (2000) established that the students in the smaller schools had fewer disciplinary infractions than those in large schools; they had higher grade-point averages than those in larger schools, and overall the students felt more of a sense of belonging in the smaller schools than in large schools.

In *Redesigning Schools, What Matters and What Works*, Darling-Hammond (2002) argues that large autonomous schools impede our students' and teachers' potential to be effective. The concept of a large high school "was never designed to teach all children to high levels efforts are often stymied by outmoded institutional structures, most notable the large, impersonal, factory-model school" (p. 55). "Students in small schools make more rapid progress toward graduation, are more satisfied with their school experience, and are less likely to drop out than students in larger schools" (p. 55). It could be argued that if the program does not change, then small or large does not matter (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p.7).

Another study done by Cushman, Cervone, and Rowley (2003) established that large schools are often riddled with crime, have little parent or community involvement, have low retention rates for teachers, and have fewer qualified teachers (p. 65). They noted that in large schools both teachers and students seem to move about the building unnoticed. On the other hand, their research demonstrates that in small schools, students and teachers are known and acknowledged as human beings essential to human psychological well-being and to learning (p. 43) "Small schools are perfect for teenagers because we need people to be

warm and care about us, to be after us - otherwise we might take the wrong road" (personal conversation with student).

In describing the results of their study with respect to the benefits of smaller schools, Copland and Boatright (2004) determined that "If educators can learn anything from more than two decades' worth of efforts to restructure schools, it is that change alone is not enough to improve schools for the students who attend them or for the professionals who work in them" (p.763). Copland and Boatright warn us that "without major shifts in the way schools are run, the transformed large schools run the risk of simply a smaller version of their former giant selves" (p. 764).

Small School Model

The Emiliano Zapata Street Academy in Northern California is an excellent model for how a small school should operate (Epstein, 2004). The students who attend this Street Academy could be identified as at-risk and/or as having been expelled and transferred from traditional large high schools in the local school district. Founded during the height of an activist period and named for one of the leaders of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, the Emiliano Zapata Street Academy was originally set up for students who had dropped out of or were in danger of dropping out of school. Today, the school accepts students from any school, as well as those who are referred by various local programs and probation officers. Some are simply looking for an alternative to the city's traditional high schools, or are children of former academy students. This environment promotes higher test scores, creates a safer environment for both students and staff, and a place that students feel at home due in principle to individualized attention from their teachers and staff. The school holds the

students responsible for their homework, appropriate behavior, and their contribution to the school and community as a whole.

A study of the effectiveness of small high schools was conducted in Washington State over a 3 year period by Lambert, Lowry, Copland, Gallucci, and Wallach (2004). This study involved seven small high schools, where data were collected from interviews and repeated observations on site. The very first year of this study provided encouraging results regarding student/teacher relationships in that teachers became aware of the individual learning needs of their students.

In the text *Choosing Small: Essential Guide to Successful High School Conversion,* Feldman, Lopez, and Simon (2006) describe the many different factors that make converting schools from large to small successful. The guide covers planning strategies, how design teams are selected and supported, and who should be on the design team. It goes further to ask the question, is large-to-small good enough or are other changes necessary to become successful such as the teachers, culture, students with special needs, students of color, and whether or not the new, smaller schools will have the resources to support these students.

Based on a study by Conchar and Noguera (2006), the experiences of Black and Latino students in an urban high school provide a revealing comparative analysis offering insight into how small schools can create opportunities and safe learning environments where youth acquire real goals, expectations, and tangible pathways for success (p. 41). Their study evaluated successful students of color who have navigated public schools through the support of social capital and small career academies within their schools - the school within a school model. Through students' own voices and perspectives, the study

revealed how and why some racial minorities achieve academic success, despite limited opportunity.

But all was not that positive. The authors noted that several working-class African American males performing well in school still only wanted to be NBA players when they became adults. They observed some Latino students who revealed they dropped their ethnic identity and rarely associate with other Latinos as they strived to get good grades. Further, African American students felt strongly that most teachers favored Asian students over them. The assumptions that Asians were good students and Black and Latino counterparts were not did raise their heads several times. The unanswered question remains, "Lots of research suggests that minority students perform in schools worse than whites generally, but how do successful minority students accomplish what they have?" (Conchar & Noguera, 2006, p. 45).

Schools and Reform

Educators and parents generally focus on the people in the organization as a community of relationships (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). A need to drive the process and the people to breakthrough performance levels has many school districts looking for innovative methods of capacity building. “Capacity building means enhancing people’s awareness and capabilities individually and collectively, to produce results they truly care about” (Michell & Sakney, 2011, p. 56).

Capacity builders are seeking the creating of processing and procedures by which the “services to students can be of the highest quality with an instructional program that is limitless and timeless” (Hauser, 2012, p. 27). Clark High School’s school within a school is the effort to build that highest quality of instruction.

Smarick (2012) identified three education reform capacity-building methods -- charter schools, vouchers, and school district transformation. In his book the *Urban School System of the Future,* he illustrates how school systems can combine into a dramatically more effective way to provide public education, how to build a public education system that serves all students effectively, and ways to respond as student populations and the demands of the economy change. Smarick's work is powerful, clear, and unfortunately out of the mainstream. He argues that our obsession with the structure of schools – be they traditional, charter, or private – prevents us from effectively using public dollars to provide an excellent education for all citizens, and he points a way forward: Let educators run their own schools, let families choose schools that best fit their needs, and let government execute accountability systems that support the best schools and close the worst.

Neerav Kingsland, CEO of New Schools for New Orleans noted that "Our nation's century old educational policy regime is limiting the intellectual and economic growth of our nation, and in the end, Smarick's plan is the only way out" (AERA presentation, San Francisco, California, 2010). In a bold, well-argued call for the redesign of urban school districts, Smarick proposes that all schools—even those previously run by a district--would have to pass muster with a higher authority and with parents able to choose that school which they believe would best fit the needs of their children. He is of the belief, not opinion, but belief that "the traditional urban school design is broken and as such it is beyond repair" (Smarick, 2012, p. 98). He suggests that all urban school districts be dissolved and replaced with charter schools. He supports this suggestion with the Catholic School concept that is small, smart, and incisive: "Only through understanding the opportunities and limitations inherent our nation's urban school systems can we endeavor to

develop the next generation of school management strategies" (p. 101). In this manner, we can be sure that new schools are regularly created, that great schools are expanded and replicated, that persistently failing schools are closed, and that families have access to an array of high-quality options" (p. 107).

Models

Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, defied the odds and, in the process, changed America. In the first half of the 20th century, Dunbar was an academically elite public school, despite being racially segregated by law and existing at the mercy of racist congressmen who held the school's purse strings (Stewart, 2013). These enormous challenges did not stop the community from rallying for the cause of educating its children.

Dunbar attracted an extraordinary faculty. One early principal was the first African American graduate of Harvard, while the large majority of teachers had graduate degrees, with several earned PhDs—all extraordinary achievements given the Jim Crow laws of the times. Over the school's first 80 years, these teachers developed generations of highly educated, high-achieving African American groundbreakers that included the first African American member of a presidential cabinet, the first African American graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, the African American army general, the creator of the modern blood bank, the first African American state attorney general, the legal mastermind behind school desegregation, and hundreds of educators (Stewart, 2013).

By the 1950s, Dunbar High School was sending 80% of its students to college. Today, as with too many troubled urban public schools, the majority of Dunbar students struggle with reading and math. For more than 80 years, the school maintained legendarily high standards in a segregated school system and developed fiercely loyal, solidly middle-

class alumni. But desegregation and changing demographics slowly eroded the reputation of the school until it became just another inner-city school with low achievement and high drop-out rates (Mathis & Jackson, 2010).

Motivation

Motivation is the desire within a person causing that person to act. People usually act for one reason: to reach a goal. Thus, motivation is a goal-directed drive, and it seldom occurs in a void. The words *need, want, desire,* and *drive* are all similar to *motive,* from which the word *motivation* is derived and all of which apply to the Clark High School issues of small versus large. Understanding motivation is important because performance concerns are affected by and influence motivation (Van Maanen, 1988).

Kurt Lewin (2010), when he introduced his *field theory,* asserted that "behavior results from a combination of the individual and the environment" (p. 46). For Lewin, the environment encompassed what he called *life spaces*, that is, all past and present places and events in a person's life. He stated "that human behavior was not only a product of one's internal makeup, but also greatly affected by the dynamic environment in which an individual lives" (Lewin, 2010, p. 46). It is clear that motivation is affected by size as well as the people within the system.

Understanding the perceptions that high school-age students hold toward education is a vital part in developing a strategy to meet the need for direct instruction and performance (Banks, 2006). The atmosphere I described in Chapter 1 should provide some insight as to the need for change. Brown (2009) conducted a qualitative study of high school-age students where he interviewed some 50 students on school environment. His overall conclusion was that the negative stereotypes and perceptions students had of

themselves were generated by their environment. Brown went on to note that most references with regards to the students themselves were done within the spectrum of a negative perspective (p. 91).

Self-perception of academic ability incorporates an individual's attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of his or her cognitive ability and/or academic skills (Gay, 2000). The research continues to tell us that a student's personal beliefs and feelings in regards to academic success are directly related to academic competency and personal satisfaction with his or her academic achievements (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). If they do not feel good about themselves, they will not differentiate about academic achievement or non-achievement. It is unfortunate that the learners who do not possess a particular skill are often blamed for their inability to master that skill when the real problem lies in the actual delivery of that skill (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Our schools and our system need to reinvent and reform in order to manage the deep, systemic changes in the education and motivation. Small versus large can effectively be a factor in this reinvention and reformation.

A key component for every school must be a safe environment with all of the students' basic needs met. Knowing students as individuals and understanding their personalities is also relevant. Moreover, understanding one's own personality is pertinent to understanding how to teach and motivate others. During the Industrial Age, Pavlov's classic conditioning theory made sense, but with globalization, teachers need to learn to differentiate in order to reach out to students in order to discover why they may avoid certain activities (Grant, 2010). Educators are realizing how important it is to have high expectations for every student. Thus, motivation can be seen as the difference between

learning that is superficial and learning that is internalized (Gambrel, Malloy, & Marinak, 2010). Students can learn and motivation can make the critical difference in ensuring that they do learn**.** Keeping them involved, motivated, and actively learning is challenging educators across the country, yet good advice on how to accomplish this has not been readily available.

Transformation

A journey of discovery, innovation, accommodation, evaluation, qualification, and interpretation (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2011) is inherent in my use of vignettes. With vignettes, I am able to gain the personal and distinctive understanding of myself while involved in the culture of small versus large. As a result, I was able to evaluate the process and the perceptions of students, teachers, and parents on the conversion of one large urban high school to three smaller high schools using safety, suspensions, student-teacher-parent relationships, quality of education, and student pride.

Summary

As our world evolves so should the method of representing the people in our world. While the use of ethnography and autoethnography is not new, the use of autoethnography has emerged as a profound method of representing underrepresented people or groups. Autoethnography allows researchers as participants to acknowledge and write about their emotions and experiences as members of the group that is being explored and not as outsiders. However, as stated by Denzin (2003), the writing must be "capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as by social scientists" (p. 200). It is not enough to be able to express one's feelings or discovery with words; it is imperative that the information presented in an autoethnography be supported by literature.

While it is equally important to recognize at the onset that narrative vignettes can serve as stimuli for understanding specific situations and acts, these same narratives have limitations that cannot and must not be overlooked. More specifically, no single autoethnographic narrative analysis should be used as a generalization when referencing any specific situation, groups of people, or act. I would hope my use of autoethnography and vignettes will emotionally and critically move readers to the point where they are impelled to take another look at how they view people, groups, and size. That would be my contribution to education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter is organized as an overview of the research on ethnography and autoethnography as it relates to my study including the employment of this method in my research. When I planned my dissertation on small versus large city schools, I started reading journals and narratives from an ethnographic perspective. I reviewed and evaluated the material and attempted to determine that which I felt would be representative of some of the experiences that might be shared by others of similar construct. According to Chang (2008), "autoethnography combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details. It follows the anthropological and social scientific inquiry approach" (p. 46). Chang offers three important aspects in autoethnography. The first aspect is researcher-friendly data collection. Autoethnographers explore their past and write about experiences that are meaningful to them, and the data are readily available (pp. 47-48). This aspect of autoethnography is gaining an understanding through analyzing and the interpreting of the data and contextualizing it in literature. Research on school size and expectations has been central throughout my study, leading to the doing, sharing, and writing of autoethnography narrative.

As part of autoethnography, the researcher becomes the data collector, acting as the link between society and the issue (Haynes, 2002). It is advantageous because it eliminates the researcher's tendency to translate or interpret responses to expressions or experiences that are comfortable for the researcher but understood by few.

The research design for my study gives voice to the experiences of faculty, students, and the community at large as to the size of an urban high school and its relationship to the faculty and students, relying basically on the researcher's experiences. I draw upon personal

observation, conversation, personal reflection, and history, enhanced by a review of scholarly literature and the collection and interpretation of anecdotal and historical artifacts as narrated.

Autoethnography is increasingly used as a research method, pushing the boundaries of qualitative inquiry by focusing on a phenomenon in the life of the researcher as the central aspect of study (Fetterman, 2010). Ethnography is defined as "the process of providing a face to fieldwork and culture with a scholarly conclusion" (p. xi). Denzin (2003) described ethnography as "capturing, interpreting, and explaining the way in which people in groups or alone try to make sense out of their lives, their worlds, and their experiences" (p. 9). An autoethnographic study then becomes one person capturing, interpreting, and explaining ways in which the world and personal experiences impacted his/her life (Chang, 2008).

As the writer and researcher in this autoethnography, life experience as a public school teacher and educator has provided me with an authenticity of background. It is in this format that I share my stories, my insight, and the reactions of others in interaction with me.

The Setting

This research is designed as an autoethnography study using the researcher's own reflections, observations, and experiences in determining if smaller high schools are better for students than a large inner-city high school's learning environment. Based on journals and diaries, the study will focus on my work as a teacher in a large inner-city high school in a California district that was converted to three smaller schools. Told in vignettes that describe the perception of the participants in my study regarding the conversion from large

to small, selected stories will document the factors that serve to contribute to my conclusions.

"Ethnography is the culture and study of an issue or population or group of people" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 10). The population or stakeholders in this case are students, faculty, and parents in a large city high school in California. Autoethnography is a specific issue or group of issues relevant to the researcher or the culture of the researcher's subject (Fetterman, 2010, p. 10). The issue in this study involves the perception of the stakeholders as to whether small schools are or would be more advantageous for student success.

Ethnography is simply the method used to understand the point of view of the group or issue being studied. It is the process of living or assimilating with the group being studied in consideration of what people say and do that characterizes the issue being studied (Marcus, 1998). It is the cultural and social study of a population or group of people, in this case, students, teachers, parents of a local school community. The bases for ethnographic research can be found in anthropological studies (Haynes, 2002).

Autoethnography is the specific issue or group of issues relevant to the researcher as a written social inquiry (Reed-Danahy, 1997). In this case, do smaller schools offer a better environment for learning than large schools. Ethnography is a unique research method because the researcher, that being me, is part of the subject or project being studied. It can be characterized by the relationship between the researcher and the teachers, parents, and students, allowing me to look back attempting to discover who, why, and how all has happened.

Autoethnography, as method, can be as rigorous, theoretical, analytical, emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena, as other respected research

methodology (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Even though there are many critics of autoethnography, for my study, this research methodology offered meaningful data and better understanding of small versus large in inner-city high school districts. The autoethnographers' personal involvement in the studies is not just about storytelling, as some might characterize it, rather it allows individuals to gain understanding of themselves as well as an understanding of the greater forces that surround them (Chang, 2008).

Participants

A scholarly personal narrative (SPN) provides the writer with an opportunity of producing a reflective piece of literature. This form of autoethnographic methodology (SPN) presents the author within an "I" aspect and the audience becomes "you" with the participants being labeled as "us" (Ellis, 2004). Presenting a personal narrative provides the writer and the participants with the ability to give insight on the topic being researched without compromising the integrity of the research. Supporters of autoethnography believe that research presented by the active participant is as valuable as being the observing participant. The belief is that one's story can provide information that can create change.

Boas (1982) is credited with the discovery that "there is no universal law to explain the complexity or ones characteristic way of life except as witnessed" (p. 4). Boas, a German anthropologist, pioneered the scientific, holistic approach to ethnography recognizing the need to study and interpret findings from a multiplicity of variables (Hayes, 2002). According to Van Maanen (1988), "the crucial contribution is to urge students to stop relying on second-hand reports and go to the field itself to collect the data" (pp. 16-17). He cites the person that England recognizes as the father of ethnography, one Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who studied the Trobriand Islanders while in the South

Pacific. At that time, he was under house arrest by the British, so spent his time observing, researching, and studying the people of that island calling it a "lived experience" (p. 14).

Ellis and Bochner (2006) claim that autoethnography should encompass a person's life wholeheartedly. Through telling the experience and analyzing how the experience affects one's life, it becomes a shared experience with those who are part of the process. For me, autoethnography is by far the most logical research method that will allow me to gather data and information to illustrate my premise, that large schools create barriers for interpersonal connections between students, parents, and faculty members. Copland and Boatright (2004), in their study of small schools, found that small schools can foster a deeper relationship between families, communities, and staff members; that students' test scores and attendance move in a positive direction when large schools are converted into small schools; that students feel safer in a small school; that there is less violence and overreaction in a small school; and that there is a higher graduation rate in small schools compared to large schools. Autoethnography is a research methodology that allows me to describe and systematically analyze perceptions of the participants' experiences in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

This type of research requires the researcher to integrate theory, practice, and meaningful applications of research results in his own workplace (Haynes, 2002). In addition, the researcher collects and analyzes information based on actual subjects (faculty and students) to understand and possibly solve the problem. Autoethnographic methodology focuses on a group or culture and uses the writer's own experiences to reflect back on himself and look more deeply at the interaction between self and others (Ellis, 2004; Chang, 2008). Researchers can use various methods to employ autoethnography with

one common method being the sharing of vignettes in a reflective or narrative manner, which is known as a scholarly personal narrative (SPN). This method should not be confused with an autobiographic format (Chang, 2008).

The geographical setting of this autoethnography is a local high school in a large urban community in California. The results of my study were guided by two queries: Was Clark High School ready for a conversion to small autonomous schools and would the conversion be an effective model for the students, teachers, parents, and school community? Elements involved included the consideration of changes in student suspension rate, student attendance, degree of violence, graduation rates, and changes in API test scores as perceptions of success or failure.

I have represented these queries with a series of vignettes beginning with my personal story, starting with my years as a student, continuing as a teacher and my years at Clark High School. My data and analysis include the impression of one student, with whom I had a close relationship during the time of the study, a teacher and close colleague with whom I had many conversations about the conversion, and an active parent who had two students at Clark High School with whom I had many conversations about the benefits of a small school conversion.

Chapter Four: Autoethnographic Data and Analysis

Vignettes

My study consists of a series of autoethnographic vignettes. Many of them represent my experiences at Clark High School, in California, in an area where the wealth level of most families was very low, and the crime rate was high.

At the time of the study, there were about 325 students at Clark High School. Fifty percent were African American and 40% were Latino (Figure 2). The rest of the population was a mixture of Asian and Middle Eastern descent.

I will represent the results of my study, based on the analysis of my autoethnographic data, in seven vignettes that describe the perception of all the participants in my study regarding the small school conversion. The seven vignettes will include: (a) my personal story, starting with my years as a student in elementary, junior high, and high school; (b) my experience as a classroom teacher at Clark High School before it converted into three small schools; (c) my experience as Parent Liaison at Clark High School when it converted into three small schools; (d) the impressions of one student who attended Clark when it was a large school and when it had converted into three small schools; (e) a teacher's perspective (a close colleague), at Clark High school, with whom I had many conversations about the small school conversion; (f) my interactions with a parent who had concerns about the small school conversion; (g) my troubling interactions with teachers from Teach for America at Clark High School after the small school conversion.

Vignette 1

I had always dreamed of attending an Ivy League college while attending high school in Las Vegas. In high school I was elected to the Student Council and participated on the debate team and other extracurricular activities. I played high school football, and I

remember one day after practice, my coach pulled me aside, and told me that if there was such an award, he would nominate me as "the best third-string wide receiver." I was not sure if that was something I should have been proud of. Anyhow, I was popular with my peers, teachers, and administrators. I was chosen to spend a semester in South Africa as a foreign exchange student. However, there was one thing that was problematic: I graduated from high school with barely a 2.0 GPA.

I came from a large family. I was the third of eight children. My mom, at one time, worked as a professional model and dancer. My birth dad was a laborer. My parents divorced when I was 8 years old, and my mom remarried soon afterwards. My mom and stepdad operated two small grocery stores and owned a construction cleaning business. This enabled them to move the family to a better neighborhood with, supposedly, "better schools." The high school I attended was a large school with 2,600 students, 95 % White, and upper middle class. The remaining student population was African American and "other." I remember walking the school's halls, observing the new buildings, the new grand theater, feeling how lucky I was to be there. The students, teachers, and administrators all seemed to be polite. There was only one African American male counselor, and I was fortunate to have him as my counselor. Even though the school was 95% White, all the students in my classes, except for PE and Drama, were African American. Instead of taking an Algebra class, I was enrolled in General Math. Instead of taking Literature, I was put in a Fundamentals of English class. I remember my mom constantly threatening to sue the district for placing all the African American students in these "dumb classes." I remember asking the principal to be placed in an Algebra class. There was always an excuse why I was not qualified to be in Algebra.

One day, during passing period, at the beginning of the second semester, I saw my mom walking into the principal's office. She had her best miniskirt on, her Diana Ross wig, fake eyelashes, fishnet stockings, knee-high boots, her model runway walk, and she had her Angela Davis face on. I just knew it was the beginning of a revolution, and everyone was going to blame me because I wanted to be in that stupid Algebra class! I was thinking, if I

had just kept my mouth shut and not rocked the "norm," my mom would not be about to start a race riot.

One hour later, I was called into the principal's office. As I was walking to the office, I was thinking, "Why is she doing this to me? Tracking is wonderful." (I didn't really believe that, but, at the time, I was embarrassed because my mom was on campus advocating for my education). I walked into the office, and there was my mom, posed, standing with her hands on her hips, with the principal and vice principal. The principal handed me my new class schedule. My mom explained to me that, as of tomorrow, I would be taking Algebra l and English Literature.

My first day in Algebra felt like the first day in a new school: small class, quiet, engaging, with attentive students and a teacher who seemed to have a good grasp of the subject matter. I was the only African American in class. My African American peers asked me how I was able to take Algebra. I told them that they needed to bring their moms to the school and demand that the administration place them in these classes. Because I came in the class at the beginning of the semester (January), I struggled, studied hard, came in class during lunch and after school for tutoring, and I received a decent grade for the semester. I was proud that I was able to pass the course after enrolling in the class so late in the school year.

The small Algebra class reminded me of a sixth-grade class in the small elementary school I attended before my parents decided to place me in this "better school." That class had about 16-20 students; the teacher, Ms. Hodge, knew all of her students and their families and she lived in the community. She was African American, and she often gave us a reality check about what to expect from "White people," our history, what we needed to do to become successful African American adults, how to combat racism, and how to love ourselves. The classwork was challenging and engaging, and it was culturally sensitive. I received personal attention academically and when I was disciplined (When I got my *** "whooped"). One time, I got in trouble for calling a student a "four-letter word." By the

time I got home from school, Ms. Hodge was already at my house, sitting at the dinner table with my parents. I think that is why today I am a strong proponent of drop-in home visits.

I was never an "A" student in this small class. I consistently received B's and C's. When I wasn't focused and was causing disruptions in class, instead of sending me off to the principal's office, Ms. Hodge took back control with her strong presence and her motherly instinct. In this small school, I looked forward to each day, and I enjoyed and appreciated Ms. Hodge's "tough love."

At one time, to build better relationships with our White schools across the district, our school was involved in an exchange program. Ms. Hodge prepared her students for this visit. She encouraged us to have self-respect and to show the White students that we are proud of being Black. She also reminded us how to behave and interact with the White students, not being submissive (overly welcoming) because she assumed that the White students would not welcome us with open arms.

In conclusion, I am a byproduct of a small and a large school. I thrived in a small school environment. All during my years at my small elementary school, I gained knowledge about self-respect, self-awareness, and the importance of being a respectful Black man. Ms. Hodge knew my faults and strengths and encouraged me to develop my strengths and to improve on my weaknesses.

As a Black student in a small elementary school, my experience was very similar to the experiences of other Black and Latino students, documented in studies cited earlier (e.g., Conchar & Noguera, 2006). Their experiences in their small schools allowed them to pursue their goals and become successful because of the kind of personal attention given to them by their teachers and other members of the staff at their schools.

On the other hand, as with the Black and Latino students documented in those same studies - who attended large high schools - when I transitioned into my larger junior high and then high school, I never received feedback from any of my teachers. Sometimes, I don't even think my teachers knew my name. When I was disciplined for minor infractions, the teachers' first response to me was to suspend me, unlike Ms. Hodge who would

discipline me in the classroom and even visit my home. Her method of discipline was to do home visits, developing a close relationship with my parents. As I reflect back on my small versus large school experiences, comparing them with the experiences of the Black and Latino students, I feel strongly that the small school environment is more conducive to supporting the success of Black and Latino students.

Vignette 2

During my first year at Clark High School, I experienced a system in complete disarray. Most of the administrative staff was new, half of the teachers were either new to the school or they were substitute teachers, and there was not a Master Schedule in place. The first month of school, half of the nearly 1,700 students were waiting in long lines to be assigned to their classes. The other half was either hanging around the campus or they took it upon themselves to attend classes they were not assigned to. It was not until halfway through the first marking period that students were finally assigned to their right classes.

By this time, I was on my third teaching assignment. The first teaching assignment lasted 30 days. I remember 2 days before the first assignment ended, I was walking with another teacher during passing period, and we witnessed a group of students chasing a young teacher in the campus courtyard, after the students ran her out of class. I could hear the commotion and screams before I actually saw the assault. The campus security did reach her before she sustained any serious injuries. Because Clark High School was not safe, was overcrowded, and was not properly staffed with enough security, the other teacher and I decided not to intervene, afraid of becoming victims ourselves. The other teacher turned to me and said to me, “You are going be the next teacher in that classroom.” The next day the principal called me into her office and explained to me that she needed a “strong male presence” to teach that same English class. I explained to the principal that my subject area

was United States History, not English. In fact, English was my worst subject. I told the principal that I would need my own security, a working clock, and a working phone, if she wanted me to teach the class.

The first week of class, everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong. The class had nearly 50 students; the students didn't seem to want to learn, there were drug transactions going on in class, and the police had raided the class looking for two students who had committed a serious crime off campus. The class was too big, and the students were too disruptive to begin the learning process. In order to teach the class effectively and understand the students' learning styles, I had to quickly figure out how I was going to bond and establish a trust with the students. The next week I met with the principal and explained to her that there were too many students in the class which was creating an unsafe environment. I requested that half of the students be transferred to other classes. A week later, the principal placed about 20 students into other classes. Immediately, due to the smaller class, the students began to feel safe and were actually learning and coming to class to learn. I established respect, bonded with the students, and was able to understand the dynamics of their home life.

Over the course of that year, even though I was able to connect well with my students, I began to question my desire to remain in public education. At Clark High School, I witnessed and experienced every negative aspect of a system gone wrong. It made me cynical. I remember waking up in the morning asking the Lord, "What did I do to be placed in such a dysfunctional and dangerous environment?" I wondered if Clark could ever be saved from the district mismanagement and lack of support, few credentialed and qualified teachers, student resentment, and the lack of parent participation in their children's

education. On any given school day, there were not enough substitutes to cover classes when the teachers of record would call in sick. Classes had to be doubled up. This created an unsafe environment. "I have visited schools with six vacancies two months after the opening of school. One San Francisco Bay Area junior high school had seven classrooms staffed by a rotation of day-to-day substitute teachers throughout an entire school year. This meant that approximately 800 children lived through educational chaos at least one hour per day for an entire year" (Epstein, 2011, p. 63).

During that year at Clark, there were at times two to three classes which did not ever have a permanent teacher. Because of the school's violent reputation, STIP subs did not want to work at the school long term. This created a situation where the students would have different subs every other day. Literally, the subs were told to babysit the students and make sure that the students were safe.

After each grading period, instead of students receiving a letter grade, they were given either a "P" for passing, if they came to class, or they received an "NP" Not Pass. The "NP" was usually given to students who did not come to class or to students who were disruptive. Unfortunately, the students who were college bound had to make up the class in summer school.

During my second year at Clark High School, I remember telling myself that in order to gain respect from the staff and students I needed to be defensive, cold, and strict. Clark was a large high school so that many times the environment did not allow our staff the opportunity to know the students, gain respect from the students and staff, and develop personal relationships with the students and their families. I eventually developed a reputation for being strict, impersonal, and having little tolerance for students with behavior

issues. I realized that I was not giving the students the encouragement they needed, and I thought I was doing more harm than good. I felt powerless. I began to evaluate my limited abilities to change a system that had been dysfunctional for a long time. I needed to find a way to empower the students. I remember talking to a young African American math teacher about the discouraging situation at Clark. We shared similar concerns, entangled in a broken system, developing a distrust of public education, and questioning ourselves as to whether we were actually educating students or were actually a part of the problem.

I remember preparing for the upcoming school year, when Clark would no longer be the once large autonomous school but would transform into three small schools. I was excited about the transition. There were promises that student test scores and the teacher and staff retention rates would increase, that there would be smaller classes, more parent involvement, and a safer campus - all as a result of the conversion. There was much anticipation. There had been a great deal of time preparing for the change, several SSC (School Site Committee) meetings, a great deal of money spent, and lots of planning for this day. I remember working with the principal 10 to12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 4 weeks, planning for the first day of school. The previous years, the first day of school seemed to always be filled with students waiting in long lines, trying to get their classes, students being assigned to the wrong classes, some teachers not reporting to work, and not enough desks and books for the students.

I remember that there was a sense of urgency to change the volatile situation. The campus was a ticking time bomb. The environment was tense, and there could easily have been a riot: students vs. teachers, administrators vs. teachers, students vs. students, or even the librarian vs. the custodian. Everyone was on edge! Students sensed the danger and

became more aggressive toward administrators and teachers, due to the fact that they felt they had to protect themselves from the hostile environment and lack of adult supervision and structure.

I remember teaching Algebra. A male student received an "F" for the semester. I tried to explain to him why he received the grade, but he felt like I should have given him a better grade. The same day, during lunch time, he and a group of other students came to my classroom and threatened me. They said if I didn't change his grade, they were going to "do me in." I had to tell them that they could try, but that I would take a few of them "out." They quickly realized that I was not going to back down, and that I was not going to change the grade. The student who had threatened me was arrested and expelled from Clark High School. This incident clearly displayed the hostile environment that was created by a large system that did not receive proper support. Clearly, Clark was neglected.

If you ever visit a prison, what do you see? You see plenty of staff; the staff is paid well; the facilities are clean; you don't see division among the staff, and there is a nurse, doctor, and therapist. Most of the time, it is peaceful, and the grounds are clean and well groomed. It is the same at churches, and practically at every government agency: The grounds are clean and manicured. When Clark High School was a large school, we could not keep custodians because they were either overworked or they were afraid to come to work after a couple of them were assaulted. So, there were times that the grounds had not been attended to for days.

Recently, the state of California was ordered by a federal judge to downsize all California state prisons. The judge argued that California state prisons were overcrowded which led to an unsafe environment. I ask why Clark High School didn't receive financial

support from the state like the prisons received. There should have been a court order to break Clark High School up because it was too big and unsafe for the students and staff.

Most of the other teachers and I knew that something needed to be done about the dysfunctional school environment at Clark. However, we were afraid of what the administrators were proposing. I knew that converting Clark into a small school was a start. Our forgotten students needed something better than what was in place. They needed an environment that was safe where they could learn and strive to reach their potential.

Vignette 3

As the students strolled into the school the first day of the conversion to the three small schools, most of them seemed to have reservations about any benefits to the new arrangement. They weren't sure if the conversion would make any difference in whether or not they were going to get their class schedule and wondering if their teachers would show up for work. As it turned out, though, there were no long lines, no glitches with the students' class schedules, no teacher vacancies, and the atmosphere seemed to be peaceful. As the day progressed, most of the students seemed to be happy and comfortable in their new setting. However, I told the principal that I couldn't believe how smoothly the transition was going. I explained to him that "this is the calm before the storm." I was waiting for fights to happen, teachers calling me to escort students out of class because of their disruptive behavior, and students hanging out in the bathrooms.

Much to my surprise, however, for the first few weeks, I remember actually witnessing learning taking place. Students were staying after school for tutoring, and they were utilizing the computer lab for research and homework. I remember planning Back-to-School Night, and, in order to increase the parents' participation, I decided to do a potluck.

I was expecting about 25 parents, based on previous numbers from the period when Clark was a large school, but, I was amazed to see that nearly 150 parents attended! Parents got an opportunity to meet their children's teachers with whom they shared information to better support the students, and they exchanged email and telephone numbers.

Even with all of these positive developments, though, I was still pessimistic about Clark's future even as a set of small schools. The violence that had taken place when Clark was a large school (e.g., shootings and assaults on students and staff) made it difficult for me to trust anyone or anything at the school, and I continued to treat the students as "suspects." I recall when a student was sent to my office for a minor infraction, I automatically reacted to the situation the way I had when the school was large. My tone was impersonal, my language was inappropriate, and it was not a learning experience for the student. I remember the principal calling me and the head security guard into his office. He explained to us that the old Clark High School was a thing of the past and that the old discipline techniques were no longer necessary in the small school. He explained that one great thing about a small school was that we had the opportunity to build trusting relationships with the students, and we had the opportunity to turn their mistakes into learning experiences. Whereas, the large school had over 1,600 students, now there were only 325 students, and the teachers would have plenty of resources for positive interventions with the students.

When Clark High School was one large school, it had some of the most pedagogically knowledgeable teachers around. Teachers were committed to the success and the well being of the students. At the time, most of the teachers at Clark had been raised in the community or in similar communities, many were African Americans, and they had been

teaching at Clark High School for many years. However, the teachers did not have the structural support to increase test scores, increase the graduation rate, curve campus violence, reduce class size, and increase the teacher retention rate.

Having worked at Clark High School with its large school functions, when it converted to small schools, the word safety was clearly at the forefront for all stakeholders. After a few months of small versus large, data were gathered on some key issues that demonstrated some 87.5% of the student body felt they were living in a safer school environment since the conversion (Figure 3).

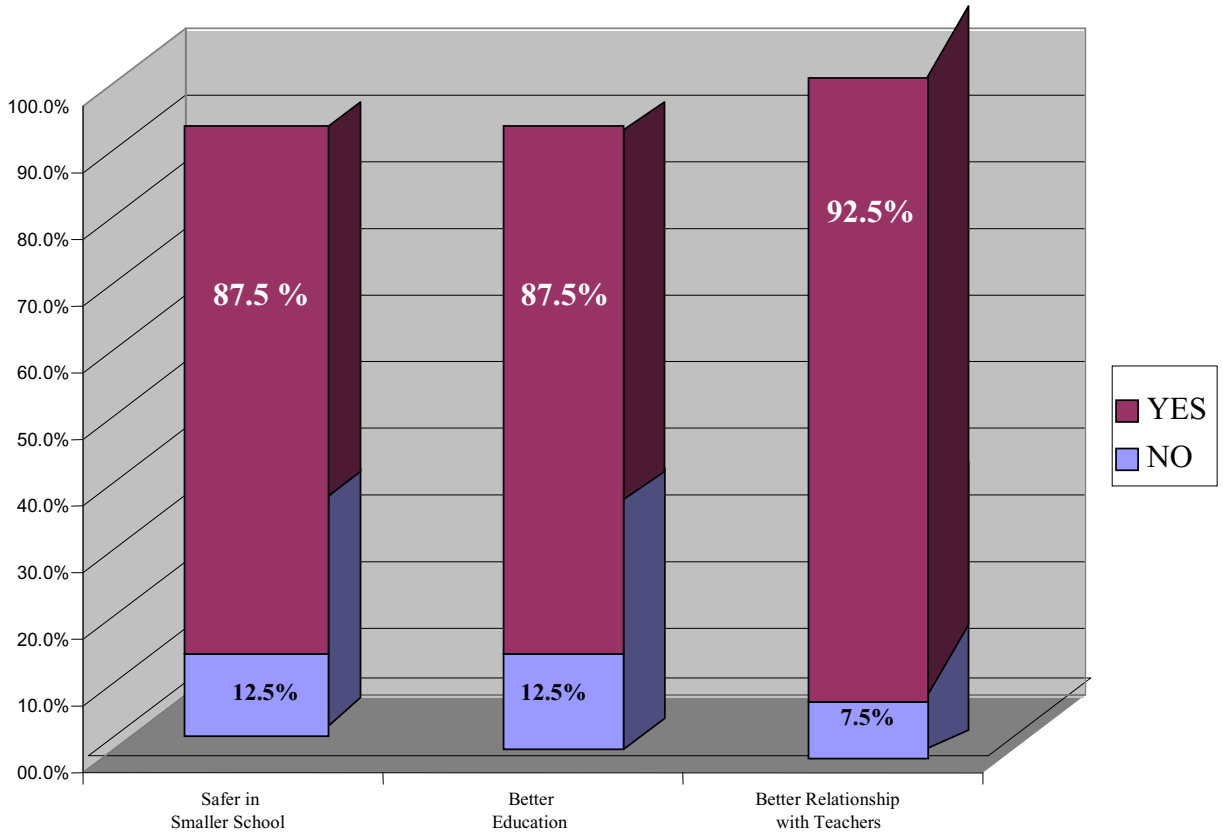


Figure 3. Student assessment of small schools

Before the conversion, teachers were physically assaulted by students, and during my first 2 years at Clark High School, I had gang members come to my classroom with threats, wanting revenge because I had disciplined one of their gang members.

Once Clark converted into three small, autonomous schools, I no longer experienced, observed, or heard about any assaults against teachers. Later in the year when I asked a parent if she felt safer for her children once the school was smaller, she replied, "I felt that the school was safe as a whole because of the conversion. On the other hand, I feel the campus still had security flaws. Anyone can still walk on campus and do whatever they feel like doing including threatening school personnel on duty."

I no longer witnessed the violence I had experienced when Clark was one large school. There was a time when I would look out of my classroom window, and there would be two or three fights going on at one time. After the conversion, I also experienced fewer shootings. I recall before the conversion when a student collapsed in the main office from a gunshot wound to the back. There also was a time I witnessed another shooting where three students were shot, and one of those students became paralyzed for life.

In order to reduce suspensions, after the conversion to three small schools, Clark High School developed a suspension policy working with other stakeholders to create procedures to proactively address the conditions that were leading to suspensions. The effort to reduce suspensions was a priority. The school security officers were given additional responsibility to intervene before conflict reached the administrator level. Clark's suspension policy also included input from the entire staff. Each year the staff changed, amended, and modified the discipline and suspension policy. According to my school district's Executive Summary Accountability Report Card (2005-2006), in 2003/2004 - the year before Clark High School

converted into small schools - 14% of its students were suspended for various discipline reasons. In the 2004/2005 school year, the percentage dropped to 12.8 %.

Also, when Clark High School was a large school, it failed many of its students and teachers. It became a revolving door where too many students were unrecognized and slipped through the cracks. Many of these students dropped out of school because they did not get the adult care that could have prevented them from falling through the cracks.

Working and living in the community gave me an opportunity to interact with the students outside the campus. I would see them at the local grocery store, at the corner liquor store, at the barber shop, and at church. Many times when I would run into students in the community, I did not realize that they had dropped out until I had a conversation with them. For example, one time toward the end of the semester, there was this kid I recognized who was in front of me in the line at the grocery store. I asked him how he was doing, and I began to think that I had not seen him at school lately. He explained to me that he had not been to school all semester. Since Clark was such a large high school with so many students, I did not notice that he had been absent from school because I did not have a personal relationship with him or with any of his teachers. If I had had a relationship with him, I would have noticed his absences, and I would have made phone calls to his parents/guardians. Also, if Clark had been a small school, I could have visited his home before he became lost and fell through the cracks.

My experience, working under the "large" school format at Clark High School, confirmed by the work of Copland and Boatwright (2004), led me to the conclusion that the students had easier access to their teachers in the smaller schools and that the relationship between the school and parents had improved. That was evident when one noted the number of parents now attending meetings and becoming actively involved in school matters working with the teachers.

According to teachers, in order for students to have a better relationship with their teachers, all teachers must pull their own weight. If not, there is more of a negative effect on the students. One was quoted stating, "teachers need to be consistent when it comes to day-to-day and year-to-year attention and support." Regarding the changes at the school after the conversion, she added, "We selected staff and shared this vision and empowered them to take ownership. Could this have happened in a big school setting? Perhaps, but since the conversion, we know the students, even those who we do not personally teach. We can share resources - both material and experiential - in a more effective way. It really feels like a village coming together to raise a child" (personal conversation, 2006)

A parent was known to have stated, "I do feel I have a voice now that the small schools exist because when I call regarding a certain matter about my child, I usually get a result. Having a small school allows the principal and staff to have a better handle on the children and the teachers. My voice is really known at the school. I have the respect from most of the staff and teachers. When I enter the campus, I am greeted by my name."

Once Clark converted to three small schools, the teachers and staff were indeed able to develop a better understanding of who their students were. Before the end of the first quarter, once the small school conversion took place, the teachers were required to do home visits. I trained them during our weekly Personal Development Days and emphasized the importance of home visits. I wanted the teachers and staff to understand that home visits were meant to benefit all students and their parents, and my goal was to help transform parents who were "distant or unresponsive" into allies and communicators. We did not want to give the teachers the impression that home visits were a strategy for only hard-to-reach or disengaged families.

I remember one day, after visiting a student's home, I found out that he told his peers that when he got home from school "Littles" was at his house eating and watching television with his parents. That created a bond between the student and me. He saw the human side of me, and it also showed him and his parents that I really cared about him as a student. That experience reminded me of when my teacher, Ms. Hodge, in the small elementary school I attended as a kid, came to visit my parents and me at my house. It totally changed the dynamic of my relationship with that teacher, and my visit with my student's family totally changed the dynamic between him and me. "Teachers always benefit from learning more about their students' interests and experiences and about parents' goals for their children. All parents appreciate a teacher meeting them on their turf and taking the time to listen to their questions, concerns, hopes and dreams. I love doing home visits because they show families how much I care about their kids and remind me that every family wants the best for their child" (Ross, 2011).

I truly believe that this type of connecting with the students could not take place during the large school era. We could not have visited 1,600 homes. It was just too large a student population to serve in that personal way. One of the great benefits of a small school is that you can easily get to know the students. I could have a positive conversation with students in the hallway, and I knew all of the students' first and last names, their nicknames, and their parents'/guardians' names. I knew all of the students' grades from the most recent marking period and their attendance and discipline records. For the students who were under my radar because of their attendance or discipline issues, I had their parents' cell phone numbers logged in my phone. Each morning I would wait at the front entrance of the school, greeting students with a handshake or hug. Students who came late also received a handshake or hug, and, many times I would call their parents on my cell phone right at that moment, and the students would have to explain to them why they arrived late to school.

Based on my experiences in both a large and a small school environment, I have concluded that these personal interactions with students and parents were only able to take place because of the small school setting.

Vignette 4

Shamika **(**fictitious name) was one of many students who had come to be known as "frequent milers." These were the students who would come to my office frequently because of their disruptive behavior. At Clark High School, during the last few months of the large school, I was responsible for student discipline and attendance issues. When students were referred to my office, they were usually sent there because of their behavioral or attendance issues. I remember this one particular incident when I received a call from the Alameda County Sheriff's Office. AC Transit (Alameda County Transportation), provides transportation for the students in the county, and the Alameda County Sheriff's office is responsible for protecting students commuting to and from school on AC Transit. The officer explained to me that they had an arrest warrant for Shamika, and they wanted to make sure she was a student at Clark High School and if she had been in class today. According to the officer, on her way home the day before, Shamika and a few other girls violently attacked another student on the bus. The victim reported that Shamika and the other girls attacked her for no apparent reason. By law, students are still held accountable for their actions transiting back and forth to school/home on the bus. Shamika was suspended for 3 days for the attack.

Before this incident, Shamika had been involved in other violent incidents. I found out later in the school year that she was the leader of a violent girls' gang that had a very bad reputation for attacking other students and stealing. I also found out that Shamika's

older brother was a leader of a notorious gang who was responsible for murdering innocent people. Her brother received a life sentence for those crimes.

At this time, I had written her off, and I had labeled Shamika an at-risk student. I did not believe she would finish her freshman year, nor did I expect her to be back at Clark the next school year. My relationship with her was, at best, tumultuous. She dreaded coming into my office, and I also dreaded knowing that she was coming. When she was referred to my office, I had to expedite her suspension, in order to deescalate the situation for which she had been sent to the office. There were always five to six students waiting in the office, waiting to be seen by me, for many different behavioral violations. I had to move them out fast.

At the time, Clark High School had 1,600 to 1,700 students. Shamika and many other students were constantly fighting, cutting school, failing their classes, and had no support system in place to curtail their violent behavior. There was not enough staff for positive intervention through which students could learn and grow from their mistakes, and there was not enough staff for in-house suspensions. The only option I had for students like Shamika was to suspend them for 3-5 days, depending on the severity of the violation, or transfer them to an alternative school.

Before the opening of the next school year, when the small school conversion took place, I had identified all incoming and returning students who had discipline, attendance, or academic issues from the previous school year. The new small school was going to have no more than 325 students, and I decided to take advantage of the small number of students I had to deal with who had previous behavior and academic problems. I had grouped them into cohorts. Students with academic issues were notified that they would need to be

assessed in two different academic core areas, Math and English. If they scored below a certain number, they would be required to attend a summer program called "Summer Bridge." Students with discipline and attendance problems were notified that they would need to be placed on an "Attendance and Behavior Contract." This contract monitored their attendance and behavior by having their teachers, parents, and I sign a form on a daily basis. If the students had an 80% or better attendance rate, they would be taken off the contract. If their attendance was worse than that, they would remain on the contract. If the students' attendance continued to get worse or they refused to fulfill their contract agreement in other ways, they would be sent to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB). "The School Attendance Review Board (SARB) aims to develop relationships with students and families in order to understand the challenges that students face in attending school. The School Attendance Review Board's goal is to improve graduation rates and reduce dropout rates for students with continuous attendance challenges. Its purpose is to encourage students and families to identify and address these issues. Students are referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) after all the resources available to a school's 'Student Attendance Review Team' (SART) have been exhausted" (Oakland Unified School District. 2014).

At the beginning of the new school year, as I followed the new mandates, Shamika was placed on a contract, and she was required to attend Summer Bridge. She was also required to sign up for a mentor, and I decided that her mentor was going to be me! I immediately gave her some "good ol' fashion, tough love." I explained to her that I was going to shut down her "operation" and that she had some choices to make, and they had better be the right ones. If she couldn't make the right choices, I was going to make those choices for her, and she wouldn't like them. I started off by doing home visits. Her

grandmother and I became best friends; I convinced Shamika that she had natural leadership abilities, and I suggested to her that she should run for student government. She was elected to Student Government/Leadership, and she started to receive counseling from Children's Hospital. Shamika also recruited two other female gang members into Student Government/Leadership. At the end of the school year, her GPA had gone from a 1.9 to a 3.5. She did not have one discipline issue the entire school year, her attitude changed at school and at home, our relationship evolved into a father/daughter type of relationship, and her affiliation with the gang continued but not with the violence they once were known for.

Shamika is an example of how small schools can benefit at-risk students. When she was attending Clark High School with 1,600 other students, she did not have access to resources. She also did not have the individualized attention from her teachers and staff that might have helped her to change her bad choices into learning experiences. I had the chance to be a part of both systems, and I had the opportunity to personally witness the way students navigated under both systems. My experiences with Shamika and other students like her are the reason why I am a strong advocate for small schools.

Vignette 5

Earlier, I mentioned a male teacher at Clark High School who, like me witnessed the transition from one large school into three small schools. He was discouraged and shared similar concerns with me about the direction in which public education was headed. I also want to share my interactions with another teacher who was part of the small school conversion process. Ms. Line (fictitious name) had been working at Clark High School as the music teacher since the year 2000. She was raised and lived within walking distance of the campus. Previously, before she landed at Clark, she had been teaching music at other

schools in the district. She directed the school's chorus. According to *The Bay News*, her chorus is the oldest student singing group in the city. They had represented Clark High School since 1929 and have performed in places like Jamaica and on the White House lawn.

Ms. Line was an active participant in the planning stages for the conversion. She, like many other teachers including myself, had many concerns about the direction public education was headed. She was vocal about her opinions, especially when it came to Clark High School. She was concerned about the lack of qualified African American teachers, about the lack of financial resources the school was receiving, about the crime on campus, and about the high drop-out rate the school was experiencing. When the principal first introduced the small school concept to the staff, most were against the conversion. The teachers' and staff's distrust of the district was ingrained, due to previous pedagogical changes that proved too short-lived. Academies and alternative school were two examples.

I remember when Ms. Line shared her main objections to the concept. She believed that once the large school converted into the three small schools that all of the monies used to convert the school would dry up. In addition, Ms. Line asserted that once the money allocated for the conversion was gone, the district would not financially support the administrative staff which the small schools were going to need to be academically successful and safe, and to remain open. In spite of these concerns that Ms. Line had, however, she did explain to me and other staff during the planning meetings that there was a great need for a drastic change. In her opinion, the current system was not working for the students, and, even with the concerns that she was having in anticipation of the small school conversion, she believed that something like the small school model was needed to combat the problems Clark High School was facing.

During the first semester into the new small school model, it became apparent that the small schools would be successful. Ms. Line taught five classes: beginning and intermediate piano and choir. Students in her classes were excited and seemed engaged. Because of their new school and their reputation, the chorus was hired to sing at different venues around the Bay Area**.**

After the conversion, Ms. Line became much more popular and built respect with the parents and the community. She became an advocate for drop-in home visits. If a student was absent from her class, or had discipline issues, Ms. Line would visit that student's home to see if he or she needed additional support. She also became a mentor to many young women who were considered at-risk. At the beginning of the school year, Ms. Line coordinated a new approach that focused on female self-respect. She invited a local female pastor to teach the young female students about respect and self-esteem. Ms. Line wanted to change the climate on the small campus by instilling self-awareness in the 80 female students who were enrolled in her small school.

I vividly remember Ms. Line expressing satisfaction with the benefits of the small school conversion. According to Ms. Line, the small school gave her the opportunity to know her students and especially the needs of her students. She eventually became "a hands-on teacher." Ms. Line mentioned that she would not have visited students' homes before the conversion because, when the school was large, with so many students to develop relationships with, it would have been almost impossible to mend relationships with the students and their parents. Instead of building relationships, she stated that her time was mostly spent just getting through the day and trying to survive the day-to-day arduous routine.

Based on my experience working with teachers like Ms. Line, I have come to the conclusion that small schools can be the only secure place students have. After the conversion, I noticed how the students responded differently to Ms. Line. They were learning to play the piano more successfully, and they respected the class, taking it more seriously by showing up on time more regularly. There were fewer absentees, very little disruptions, and students were passing her classes in larger numbers.

If Ms. Line's example was a typical one, which I believe it was, I feel confident in asserting that small schools are the most reliable source of stability and social support for poor children. Many students in small schools are homeless, undocumented, sick or disabled, hungry, or abused, but they all have one thing in common: They all have access to safe and supportive public education. Students in small schools are more likely to feel safe because of increased adult supervision. Therefore, small schools appear to provide a safety net for poor students. By becoming smaller, these three schools maintained a comfortable, supportive environment, as observed in Ms. Line's classes, which the students could call their second home.

Vignette 6

I truly believe that parents' direct participation in their children's education can contribute to their success. Parents can have an influence on which teachers and principals are hired. They can also offer input regarding the curriculum and how school sites allocate state and federal funds. However, what I have experienced during my years in urban schools is that most parents are not aware that they have the power to influence policies. I have witnessed parents who utilized their powers and parents who did not. One parent in particular who did understand the power of a parent was Ms. Jackson (fictitious name).

Before the conversion from the large school into the three small schools, at Clark High School, Ms. Jackson had two sons enrolled there: Vincent and Earl (both fictitious names). Vincent and Earl attended Clark High School when it was one large school and once it became three small schools. I remember Vincent as a friendly student who had some attendance and discipline issues. As a result, his grades suffered. I was constantly calling Ms. Jackson about Vincent's chronic attendance issues and grades. I also reported to her that I suspected that Vincent was under the influence of marijuana while he was at school.

Earl, on the other hand, seldom missed any classes, played on the football team, and maintained above-average grades. Because Clark had over 1,600 students before it converted into three small schools, it was difficult for me to deal with every student's and parent's needs. I don't recall meeting Ms. Jackson, but I do remember speaking to her over the phone about Vincent.

I remember an incident during the first marking period after Clark had changed into three small schools. There was an adult (I assumed it was a parent) walking through the halls about 3 days a week. She would always say, "Hello, Mr. Littles." One day, I decided to introduce myself to her. She stated that she had talked to me over the phone many times the year before, and she had seen me on campus. However, she explained to me that she never had the opportunity to have a conversation with me in person. She introduced herself as Ms. Jackson. I was shocked to learn that I had been conversing with this parent over the phone for years, and, yet, I did not know who she was. She said that I had always seemed to be busy and that she had not wanted to interrupt or bother me.

As we sat in the hallway, Ms. Jackson explained to me who her sons were. She told me that one of her sons was in jeopardy of not graduating, and she said that she had been

hesitant about enrolling either one of her sons in Clark High School this year. Ms. Jackson did not like the fact that the staff did not know her, and she could not get the principal or her sons' counselor to return her calls. She expressed to me that some of her sons' teachers last year were "unresponsive" and did not have their credentials to teach. Her sons' classes had long-term subs who she believed were bad teachers, and she had felt powerless to support her sons. Ms. Jackson also had strong concerns about campus safety. She said the previous year she had witnessed fights and assaults on campus, and she had been afraid that her sons were going to become victims in such a violent environment.

The first few weeks after Clark converted into three small schools, Ms. Jackson walked into the office needing to urgently speak with someone. She voiced her concerns about her son's English teacher. She felt that her son, Earl, was not being prepared for college. In her opinion, the curriculum in that class was not challenging enough for him, and she explained that he needed to be in a class that would help him get into a university. She wanted Earl to be transferred out of his current class and into an Advanced Placement (AP) class. Eventually, Ms. Jackson's persistence convinced the principal to transfer Earl into the AP English class. This scenario reminds me of my mother when she advocated for my education by demanding that my school change my General Math class and put me in an Algebra class. In addition to Ms. Jackson, there were other parents, like my mom, who came to the Clark campus to advocate for their child's education after the small school conversion. Before the conversion, I don't recall experiencing parents like Ms. Jackson, coming to Clark and demanding that their children receive a good education.

At the end of the first marking period, Ms. Jackson and I had a conversation about how she felt about the small school conversion. She said that when Clark High School was

large she could not advocate for her sons. She felt like no one was listening to her concerns. She also stated that, since the school was now small, whenever she was on campus all of her sons' teachers and the administrative staff knew her by her first name. She felt that Clark's administrative staff and teachers now treated her with respect.

At the end of the first semester, however, Ms. Jackson received discouraging news from the school about her son, Vincent. He was cutting and failing his classes. She asked the administrative staff to closely monitor his attendance. We agreed that if he came to school late or missed a class, we would give her a call. After three different occasions when Ms. Jackson had to come to school because Vincent did not show up for one of his classes, he was counseled by the administrative staff, by his counselor, by his teachers, and by me. Vincent's classes were changed, and he was required to enroll in the school's drug and alcohol program. He was also required to seek counseling from Children's Hospital.

On many different occasions, after the small school conversion, Ms. Jackson stated how grateful she felt because the smaller environment allowed for so much more support for her and her sons. With such a positive change, she felt that Vincent now had a chance to graduate, and she was thrilled to no longer see the violence that she saw when the school was large. She became a big supporter of small schools. She was elected to the School Site Council (SSC), which is a decision-making group in public schools across the United States, consisting of administrative staff, teachers, and parents (in secondary schools, also students) whose major responsibility is the development, implementation, and evaluation of the school plan for improvement and budget. For 3 years I was the co-chair of the SSC, when Ms. Jackson was a parent member.

Vincent and Earl graduated from Clark High School. After Clark's graduation ceremony, Ms. Jackson thanked the principal and me for supporting her and her sons throughout the years. She told us that without our support and the small school concept, Vincent probably would have fallen through the cracks. She concluded that "The small school is much better than the large school." Ms. Jackson's last suggestion was that Clark should offer more AP classes and hire a better band teacher.

Some years later, I learned that Ms. Jackson's son, Earl, was a recent college graduate and was living and working in Texas. Her son, Vincent, was working and living in northern California. Ms. Jackson had remarried and is living in Texas. I vividly remember when she expressed her views about the advantages of the small school and how she had reservations about sending her sons back to Clark just before the conversion because of how bad things were when Clark was one large school. She expressed how the school culture had changed from a violent campus, where not much learning was happening, to a school where all students and parents were treated as individuals and their voices were heard.

According to Fine and Somerville (1998), when small schools are designed well, all students, parents, teachers, and staff benefit. Ms. Jackson had reservations about sending her children to Clark before it became a small school. She was pessimistic and did not trust the system. She felt the system had failed her children before and assumed that the small school was going to be no different from the large school, other than it would have fewer students.

Immediately, Ms. Jackson noticed how the environment and climate changed within the first marking period. Why was it so difficult for her not to effectively communicate with her children's teachers and staff when the school was large? I do remember the

dysfunctional environment during the time Clark was a large school. At times, I did not know if it was a passing period or not because there were so many students roaming the halls. When security or staff asked the students to go to class, they were met with language that I dare not repeat, or the students just moved from one area of the campus to another. When they are faced with such an environment, parents' concerns, like Ms. Jackson's, will not be heard or they will become secondary. I remember many incidents when administrators did not return phone calls from parents and could not address students' and teachers' safety concerns because they were too occupied with the school's daily routine.

Ms. Jackson's children did graduate from Clark High. The small school was not a perfect situation for her and her children. However, what her children did experience was an environment where they felt safe, and where they had a loving and caring staff who believed in "tough love," accountability, and loyalty. They could refer to Clark as their second home.

Vignette 7

Even though there were so many positive developments as a result of the small school conversion at Clark, described in the first six vignettes, there was also one change that was quite disturbing about which I had major concerns. It involved the influx of a new and different group of teachers, from Teach for America, who seemed well meaning but who were not very compatible with the culture of most of the students at Clark. At the time this new group of teachers came to Clark, I questioned the motivation of the district for bringing them in because they brought with them a very different mindset and approach and displaced many of our veteran teachers.

Within the first semester after these Teach for America teachers had arrived, I read about the program and learned that their mission was to spend 2 years working in an inner-city school. After their 2 years were completed, their government student loans would be waived. These teachers were prepared in a 5 - week training course and then placed in an inner-city school. They were not required to have any teaching experience, just a desire to teach. At Clark, after their second year, most of these Teach for America teachers transferred to a higher paying district or quit the field and went into law or medicine. In many inner-city school districts, nearly a third of new teacher placements were from Teach for America.

The summer before the first year Clark High School converted into three small schools, counselors, the librarian, principals, and many of the teachers either retired, were transferred, or were asked not to come back. I remember the principal called me into the office and explained to me that the school would be hiring many new and young teachers. The principal said these teachers were smart, devoted, and came from a program called Teach for America. The first week before the new school year, there was a staff meeting. I was surprised that out of nearly 16 teachers, all but 6 were White! Yes, they were all young, White, smart, upper middle class, and had come from Ivy League schools. Wow, I felt fortunate to have such a well-educated staff to work with. I knew that they were going to bring knowledge and expertise to the school. They seemed to be passionate about teaching and well versed in their subject matter. On the other hand, they had never taught before, had never been to the ghetto, had never interacted with poor, disadvantaged youth or their parents, and did not understand the culture as a whole - all of which worried me. A few of

them did know how to speak Spanish which they learned from college or they spent a year or two studying Spanish in Spain.

The first month during the school year after the small school conversion, all seemed to be going well. However, I began to notice these small rainbow stickers that had "SafePlace" written on them. These stickers were placed outside of classroom doors. I was not sure what these stickers represented or who was placing these stickers around the campus. I asked the principal and other staff members if they knew who was responsible, and they did not know.

During our next staff meeting, the principal asked the staff if anyone knew who was placing these stickers outside the classroom doors. About five of the new Teach for America teachers came forward and admitted that they were responsible for placing these stickers on the classroom doors. They explained that there didn't seem to be a safe place on campus for students who were gay or who wanted to "come out." By placing stickers outside the doors of certain classrooms, the students would know that they were safe places to express who they were. The principal did not argue for or against the idea.

A few days later, some of the Teach for America teachers asked the principal to train and educate the entire staff on how to deal with the school's gay students' needs. They argued that many of the veteran staff were discriminating against students who were gay, and the students did not have a safe place to "come out." These accusations really took me by surprise because, at Clark, we had always had a welcoming and supportive environment that embraced all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. These accusations created a rift between the new and veteran staff.

At the next staff meeting, the principal was open to the idea of the "SafePlace" stickers. However, I had reservations about the approach. I explained to the staff that I was all for supporting and accommodating every student's needs. I suggested, though, that we should look into this issue more before a decision was made. I explained that Clark High School had always had a large number of students who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. They had always been supported and respected by the students and staff.

Ms. Line, who I mentioned earlier in my paper, argued that students in the Black and Latino culture "come out" differently than students in the White community. Ms. Line said it might not be safe for the Black and Latino students to "come out" the way they come out in the White community. Ms. Line asked what happens when they leave this safe school environment after they come out. She asked if the Teach for America teachers were going to be there to protect them when they walked out these school doors. Ms. Line stressed that you can't have these Black boys walking down the streets announcing that they are gay. And, what about students who will "out" them once they are off campus and in the community? The students, especially Black boys, are at risk of losing their lives, said Ms. Line. She explained to the entire staff that "coming out" is not the same in the Black and Latino community. There are things that you just don't do.

I suggested that no more stickers be posted and that we should create a sub-committee to further discuss these topics because it was taking too much time away from other school issues that also needed to be addressed. The principal agreed. The Teach for America teachers, who originally proposed having a "SafePlace" agenda, became incensed. They accused me of being homophobic.

At the next staff meeting, a few weeks later, the new Teach for America teachers wanted to implement a policy, requiring that the male staff no longer be able to call the female students "darlings, baby, and honey." They argued that it is inappropriate and unprofessional to call the Latina students by those names. They said it was an insult to their culture. Ms. Line, a couple of other African American teachers, and I were outraged that they would accuse us of being inappropriate and unprofessional with students with whose culture we had had a great deal of experience. We argued that we had been using those endearing names with the female students for many years. My parents, grandparents, and friends had been using those expressions with the females in our families for our entire lives.

After the incident when the Teach for America teachers made those accusations, I remember having a meeting with the principal about the teachers. I told the principal that I believed they were attempting to impose their culture on us and not respecting our culture or the students' culture. I also said that these teachers were nothing but the "great white hope" because they seemed to feel that they were here to civilize us and to undo all the damage that we had caused in the past. Unfortunately, the principal decided that we should stop using those terms and start calling all students by their names. However, despite the principal's decision, because we disagreed with it, we continued to use those endearing names with our female students.

Teaching and working at Clark High School could be difficult and challenging. Clark, at the time of the small school conversion, like many other public schools, was facing decreasing funding, smaller enrollment, a smaller pool of qualified teachers, and an even smaller pool of teachers of color. Bringing Teach for America teachers to Clark High

School was meant to be an answer to the teacher shortage. They were passionate and loyal to the students. However, they did not have the proper preparation or background to fully understand what it takes to teach students who are from a different socio- economic background from their own. To be effective with an inner-city student population such as ours at Clark, these young teachers needed more training than they received by attending an Ivy League school and graduating with honors.

I witnessed these teachers trying to change the culture at Clark and trying to replace it with their own. As I mentioned earlier, it created conflict and division among the staff. These teachers should have taken the time to understand who their students were and the cultural background of the surrounding area, and they should have respected the rich culture that was already in place. Clark was what I considered to be a special needs school that needed special teachers with special training. Once Clark transitioned into three small schools, there was an increase in student test scores, the students' attendance improved, and the campus became safer. Even given all of those favorable developments at Clark, the Teach for America teachers would have been more effective if they had been prepared for the culture at Clark and respected it for what it was.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Recommendations

Findings

As I read and recorded all of my autoethnographic data that I had collected, and as I developed my vignettes, I kept a keen eye out for certain patterns across the data, asking myself: "Are the students, teachers, and parents and I agreeing or disagreeing about the impact of the conversion from a large high school into a small high school environment?" I was especially looking for what was working and not working for all of us and comparing our impressions.

My study revealed some interesting facts about small schools. Small schools foster closer relationships between the adults and students and among the students themselves. As a result, students feel more engaged with the school community, and these close relationships are accompanied by greater mutual respect. It seems that it is difficult to be abusive to others who you know and value. The students themselves recognized this phenomenon.

For years, before the implementation of the small school concept, Clark High School's campus was riddled with crime. The student body lived in an area plagued with violence and poverty and all the social ills that accompany this environment. I have clearly demonstrated that, when it comes to small schools, students in urban areas will benefit.

What is especially important about my study is that I have shown that the environment, existing in small schools, is safer than in a larger school. Safety was always an issue for parents, teachers, and students. I did not witness the number of fights I did when Clark was a large school, and Clark High School had no shootings after converting into three small schools. Also, students are less likely to be suspended from the smaller school

than from the larger one. In addition, students and teachers create a closer relationship because of the smaller class sizes, and parents have easier access to the teachers.

My conclusions corroborate the study conducted by Wasley, et al. (2000). As part of their results, they asserted that, "When students were asked why they fight less than students in larger schools, they answered: 'Because we know one another.' If this model of small schools is implemented throughout the country, you will see a decline in the high school drop-out rate, you will see an increase in standardized test scores, a reduction in pupil suspension, and a decline in school violence. Overall, you will see an improvement in the quality of education" (p. 36).

In addition to my current study, a study of my same district's new small schools was conducted by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, Inc. from February 2007 to August 2007 (the local school district New Small Schools Initiative Evaluation, Phase 1, September 7, 2007). Two external evaluators from Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, Inc. reviewed student and school performance data, surveyed 659 teachers at new small schools and comparison schools around the district, and conducted 29 in-depth interviews with teachers and principals at three new small schools. The sample comparison schools included all three of the district's remaining large high schools, as well as three middle schools and four elementary schools. These schools were selected based on their similarity to the new schools in terms of achievement levels, the composition of the student body, and the communities they served.

The study conducted by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation resulted in seven key findings:

1. The new small schools serve students, families, and communities in large, overcrowded, and low-performing schools.
2. New small schools accelerate students' California Standardized Test (CST), English Language Arts (ELA), and Math achievement more frequently than do the comparison schools.
3. Most new small schools are achieving CST and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) scores that meet or exceed projected average levels. Compared to the traditional schools that students moved from, the graduation rates at the new small high schools were higher, ranging from 69% to 97% compared to 61% to 80% at existing comparison high schools.
4. There are examples of increases in the percentage of students being designated proficient or higher on the CST as students move from existing traditional schools to the new small schools.
5. The average student, parent, and teacher satisfaction ratings achieved by new small schools were higher than the student, parent, and teacher satisfaction ratings achieved by a sample of comparison larger schools.
6. The survey data indicated new small schools are generally implementing proposed designs that address school culture, instructional program, professional learning community, parent, and community engagement.
7. New small schools can achieve high levels of organizational functioning during the first year of operation.

The in-depth study described above had findings similar to the results of my research - that smaller is better. I learned about these findings after I had completed my own research. I was not surprised by the results of that study, and I was pleased that it corroborated my own work.

Misguided Policies: The Demise of Small Schools

In 2004, the year Clark High School converted into three small, autonomous schools, critics argued that the cost of maintaining the small school model would be too expensive. They argued that small schools were too heavy financially on the administrative side. Each small school needed a principal, vice principal, counselor, and an office secretary, whereas the large school model only required one principal, vice principal, counselor, and office secretary. According to my school district's salary scale, high school principals were averaging $115,000 per year, vice principals, $95,000, counselors, $65,000, and office secretaries, $40,000 per year (the local school district Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2009). The critics argued that there might be an increase in student test scores with the small school model, but the administrative costs would eventually doom it.

In 2009, a reporter wrote in a local newspaper that my school district had too many administrators in comparison to other districts with similar student population sizes. He also acknowledged that there had been an increase in test scores and that breaking up large schools into smaller schools does give more individual attention to the students.

After Clark High School converted into three small schools, their API scores saw an increase. According to the California Department of Education, Analysis, Measurement, and Accountability Reporting Division, the 2011 projected API growth for Clark was 619.

The actual growth was 609. This is more than a 100% increase since the conversion of the large school.

By 2010, when the state returned control over to the school board, enrollment was down to 38,000 (from 55,000 in 2002), while charter school enrollment quadrupled (from 2,000 to more than 8,000). So about 18% of the district's students were in charter schools - the highest percentage in the state. Despite the cuts and downsizing, the district's debt tripled under the state takeover. That money went to contractors, consultants, and excess administrators.

In 2011, the school board for the city's school district, despite student improvement in many areas, decided that the school district could no longer financially maintain the three small schools that Clark High School had become. They decided to convert the small school model back to a large school, starting in the fall of 2012.

Clark High School closed its small schools in 2012, and it reopened back to a large school in the fall of 2012. Timothy Adams (fictitious name) was the superintendent at the time. He was under the direction of the school board, who eventually voted to shut down Clark High School's small schools. The school board members are elected officials. They can serve terms of 4 years and can be re-elected. They are hired as part-time employees, and they receive a $750 stipend each month. According to the board bylaws, and my district, the board "is elected by the community to provide leadership and citizen oversight of the district's schools." The bylaws also say that the board has four major roles: setting a direction, establishing policies, ensuring accountability, and providing community leadership. The superintendent works for the board which has the right to hire and fire him. The superintendent and the board implement policies and directions for the district. Any

major policy, coming from the superintendent or from the board, has to be approved by the board, and the board has little power over the day-to-day operation of schools. Instead, the superintendent controls the daily function of the schools. According to the bylaws, when considering policy, the board shall "involve the community, parents/guardians, students, and staff in developing a common vision for the district."

When the district announced that they would list which schools would be closing, they knew there would be an outcry from students, parents, alumni, and the community. At a school board meeting on September 23, 2011, instead of having it at the normal hearing room at the district main office, it was moved to a larger space, a high school auditorium, in order to accommodate the large and vocal crowd. I decided to attend and show my opposition to the district decision to close Clark High School's three small schools. The crowd was loud and passionate about the district's decision. I remember there were hundreds of students, parents, and teachers holding banners and chanting their disappointment in the district's decision to close their school. I also remember that there were more police officers at this board meeting than in the past. The atmosphere was loud, out of control, and the crowd was hostile toward the board. The board president took a recess in order to restore order. Timothy Adams announced his hit list, and he laid out his criteria for closing the schools: enrollment, building capacity, school performance, and whether parents ranked it highly during the enrollment process.

Theoretical Framework

There is no doubt that inner-city students benefit from small schools. It has been demonstrated in several studies besides mine, and I have demonstrated through my research that students perform better academically and socially in a small school environment. So, why are

public, small, inner-city schools under attack? Why did my school district decide not to financially support the small schools at Clark High School, eventually leading to their closure and conversion back to the large school model? What was their rationale behind closing small schools even though statistics showed that the students performed better in such an environment? And, what was their reasoning for shutting down small schools that had been proven to benefit students?

Over the years, when I was working at Clark High School, I was developing a theoretical perspective on the small school conversion and why it failed. There were several factors, related to the demise of the small school model at Clark, of which I became aware during that time which influenced my perspective on what happened. The first factor I want to describe was my interactions with a very special African American teacher at Clark whose name was Ms. Jones.

Ms. Jones, who had been teaching at Clark High School for many years, had a large influence on my thinking and on the theoretical perspective that emerged for me over the years at Clark. She had been an outspoken advocate for the school and was very popular among students, staff, parents, and the community. She was feared by the administrators and the district office because she was outspoken about the small school conversion, and she was not afraid to confront them with what she thought was unjust. She was heavily involved in the teachers' union. Ms. Jones had experienced many pedagogical changes through the years, including tracking and segregation. She gained respect among the staff because of her experiences and wisdom. The union respected her because she knew how to rally the "troops" and how to get union members to organize. She taught them how to advocate for what they believed in and to understand the political process. I witnessed how the students loved her

because she motivated them to be better students, showing them respect and how knowledgeable she was in her subject matter. I remember the parents loved and respected Ms. Jones too because they trusted her and saw her as a family member.

At the staff meetings, before the small school conversion, we knew Ms. Jones was going to create the climax of the meeting. She always started off by apologizing to the White teachers and staff because what she was about to say might offend some of them. She would start her conversation by explaining to them that what she was about to say was the truth, regarding what these "White folks" were trying to do to our schools and community. She asserted that the private education companies were looking to change the entire structure of the school. Ms. Jones warned that they would somehow find a way to get rid of the African American and other veteran teachers and the administrators. She claimed that they would bring in younger White teachers who had no experience teaching these Black and Brown kids, and they would be paid lower salaries than what the current teachers were making. She warned that these teachers would try to impose their culture onto our "kids" and look down on us veteran teachers. I always felt uneasy about what she was saying because I knew that it made people feel uncomfortable, but I also knew it was the truth. After the end of her speech, the entire staff was up on their feet cheering and clapping as though a "rock star" had just performed. "Amen," the crowd would cheer, stamping their feet and shouting all at the same time.

Ms. Jones always said that Clark was not a school but a holding tank. She would argue in the staff meetings that the school had too many students roaming the halls, and that there were not enough qualified teachers to teach, and she did not trust the administrators to implement a new and better system. I really began to believe her. I began to have second

thoughts about whether or not I could trust the administrators to implement a system that would work.

Like Ms. Jones, I have witnessed for years how privately funded education reformers have tried to change the culture and policies at Clark High School and in the district itself. I believe that the state takeover of my school district in June 2003 was planned and implemented in collaboration with Los Angeles billionaire, Jeff Dunnigan (fictitious name), whose business approach to education (reduce funding for public education and eliminate the small school model) is an example of how private policies and their influence have dismantled small schools.

During the 2002-2003 school year, the year before Clark High School converted from one large school to three small schools, the district threatened to do major budget cuts and layoffs but never made much headway with that threat. By the end of the year, in 2003, the state of California decided to take over the district and appointed a state administrator.

According to Timothy Adams, mentioned earlier, the superintendent of my school district from 2009-2013, the district was taken over by the state because of a $37 million deficit. The state-appointed administrator, Raymond Wilson, was at the time an intern in Dunnigan's Urban Superintendents' Academy. Wilson proceeded to tap into other Dunnigan Academy residents to run human resources, labor relations, finance, and the small school incubator in my district. When Wilson left in 2006, another Dunnigan Academy graduate, Regina Adams (fictitious name), replaced him. She left after a year, and her successor was yet another Dunnigan Academy graduate, Rowland Simmons (fictitious name).

Early on after the state take-over, Raymond Wilson, the first state-appointed administrator, created a diversity issue within the district. Wilson laid off teachers. Many of

these teachers, as Ms. Jones predicted, were Black and Latino. His justification was that there were too many teachers and not enough students. He then recruited Teach for America teachers to fill the vacancies that were created when he laid the veteran teachers off. Why had Wilson dismissed all the veteran teachers if there were going to be vacancies? Also, there was no policy in place to recruit teachers of color. African American and Latino parents and educators began to complain about the lack of diversity in the district and the hiring of Teach for America teachers.

Wilson and his successors laid off school custodians, security guards, clerks, and food service workers, and outsourced their work to private companies. They closed school libraries, "reconstituted" or shut down nearly half of all public schools, and cut electives. They imposed scripted learning geared to high stakes tests, and, as I mentioned earlier, they drove out veteran teachers, replacing them with Teach for America and New Teacher Project interns. According to critical race theory (Bell, 2004; Ladson-Billings &Tate, 1995), racism is permanent within U.S. society, and actions to benefit African Americans only occur when there is "interest convergence" with interests of Whites. Whenever it is possible to provide jobs to White teachers, whether or not they are as effective as African American or Latino teachers, the White teachers are hired. The theory is that Whites continue to dominate for reasons that have to do with the property relations in society and will therefore put programs in place that will ensure that those same property relations continue.

As I mentioned earlier, while the district was under state control, the superintendent cut the budget, laid off teachers, and replaced those teachers (many of whom were African American) with mostly White teachers from Teach for America. To my surprise, I found out that Sheila Gray (fictitious name), the founder and CEO of Teach for America, was also a

Dunnigan board member! It clearly seems that there was a calculated agenda between Teach for America and the Dunnigan Institute agenda to lay off many African American veteran teachers and replace them with young, White, and inexperienced teachers.

This situation harkens back to the aftermath for segregated schools in the South, as predicted by W.E.B. Du Bois (Du Bois, 1970), of the landmark court decision, *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, in 1954. As a result of desegregation, the schools, attended by African American students in the South, were dismantled, and the African American teachers were laid off. The Black students began attending schools with mostly all White students and faced a school culture that was not nearly as supportive (other than financially) as their segregated schools had been. This shift changed the dynamics of the Black students' relationships with their teachers and classmates and began the history of so-called "low achievement" by these Black students in our nation's schools.

As I described earlier, Ms. Jones warned the staff at Clark High School that the school was going to look different in the near future. She did not have a magic wand, and she was not a psychic, but much of what she predicted actually happened. She had provocative ideas and a clear understanding of critical race theory, referred to earlier. Ms. Jones was well read, believed race was undertheorized as an aspect of U.S. society and education, and she believed that racism was heavily rooted in all aspects of society, including and especially true in the academic setting.

It seems that the state wanted to redesign the school district by dismantling the current system. The district was worse off after the state returned the district to local control. When the district first announced that there would be a budget shortfall of $30 million in 2003, and they were looking to the state for a bailout, local politicians actually

wrote a state bill for a $100 million loan, and the governor signed the bill. When the state returned control to the local school district board in 2010, there was a larger debt than there had been before it was taken over by the state.

It seems apparent to me that because of their mismanagement of our district funds, and because of their hidden agenda to dismantle small schools which were actually benefitting the inner-city student population, the state-appointed administrators' decisions led to the demise of the small school model at Clark High School.

Recommendations and Future Plans

Based on the results of my study, I would recommend that all large urban high schools be converted into smaller learning environments. Historically, this larger type of high school has had low test scores, a lack of parent participation, a high student suspension rate, and a high incidence of violence on campus. On the other hand, the school in my study, once it was converted to three small schools, improved in all of those areas. However, more research is needed (such as the study conducted by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation Inc., described above) in order to verify the results of my study. In addition, there needs to be long-term financial sustainability in order for the smaller school model to survive over the years.

Given the findings of my study, I intend to continue to explore the benefits of smaller high schools. Because there are many urban schools across the United States that are experiencing the same challenges as we have in my school district, I plan to advocate for the small school model on the local, state, and federal levels.

Final Thoughts

Once school started again in the fall of 2012, within 3 weeks of converting back to a large school, there was a riot at Clark High School. Staff at Clark High school called the police to maintain order. The police cordoned off several blocks for hours near and around the campus, as students refused to disperse and return to class. There were approximately two hundred disorderly students involved in the melee. During my tenure at Clark High School, when it was three small schools, I did not witness or experience any type of violent incident of this magnitude.

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