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Author(s)   Priscilla Wohlstetter, Teachers College, Columbia University; Brandon Buck
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Intentionally Diverse Charter Schools: Why and How?

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Abstract
This paper presents findings from a yearlong exploratory mixed-methods research study that investigates a national sample of six (6) intentionally diverse charter organizations. Intentionally diverse charter schools work against national public schooling trends to deliberately promote socioeconomically and racially integrated schooling spaces. Data sources include 2069 survey responses from students, parents, teachers and administrators across twenty-one (21) schools; interviews with charter leaders; and document analyses. The authors, first, map the national policy landscape around the diverse charter model; second, they describe the various rationales that underwrite the diverse charter missions; third, they describe the strategies and practices schools employ to attract and retain a diverse student population; finally, survey analyses interpret stakeholder perceptions around the diversity in schools.

Objectives
Intentionally diverse charter schools are relatively new on the scene and represent only a small number of charter schools (roughly 100 nationwide) (Diversecharters.org). These schools work to promote socioeconomically and racially integrated rather than segregated schooling spaces. While some research has investigated traditional school districts that have employed income-sensitive controlled choice student assignment plans to advance diversity across schools (Armor & Duck, 2010; Bloomfield et al., 2009; Century Foundation, 2002; Kahlenberg, 2003; Palardy, 2013; Perry, 2010), virtually no systematic research has examined intentional diversity in the charter sector. Given that intentionally diverse charters are relatively new and relatively rare, our paper aims to draw attention to these schools and present early research on their practices and strategies.

Research Context
One of the most common criticisms of charter schools is that they tend to exacerbate rather than ameliorate segregation (Bifulco et al, 2009; Diem, 2002; Frankenberg et al, 2010; Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Wohlstetter, Smith & Farrell, 2013). Myriad studies have shown that, despite being typically exempt from neighborhood school assignment plans and district attendance zones, charter schools tend to be more segregated than traditional public schools, often isolating low-income children of color (Armor & Duck, 2010; Bifulco et al., 2009; Holme & Wells, 2008; Reardon & Owens, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Scott, 2005). Part of this is by design. Many high-performing charter management organizations, which tend to attract philanthropic funding, aim to exclusively serve the most disadvantaged populations (Russo, 2013; Scott & Quinn, 2014; Scott, 2005). And since most charter schools are located in urban communities (National Alliance, 2015), those populations tend overwhelmingly to be represented by low-income families of color (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2012; Reardon et al., 2006; Roda & Wells, 2013; Scott & Quinn, 2014). Additionally, other studies have demonstrated that the mechanics of choice—homophily, word-of-mouth social networks, and preferences
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regarding pedagogical models — reproduce the segregation already present across and within neighborhoods and other social arrangements (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Scott, 2005). Charter school recruitment, marketing, and location strategies often amplify these effects (Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Holme & Wells, 2008; Jacobs, 2013; Lubienski et al., 2009; Lubienski, 2007).

Advocates of diversity and integration have long warned of the problems inherent in isolating children by income or race (Alves & Willie, 1987). And a great deal of literature supports those concerns. Since the 1960s research by J.S. Coleman, Christopher Jencks and Annette Laraue (to name a prominent few) have demonstrated that family background, even more than school or teachers, is the strongest predictor of a child’s academic success (Bloomfield & McNamara, 2009; Borman & Overman, 2004; Harris, 2009). And the statistics bear this out. High-poverty schools, on balance, tend to perform far worse (lower test scores, higher expulsion rates, lower completion rates, and lower college attendance rates) compared to middle-class and more affluent schools (Aberger et al., 2013; Borman et al., 2004; Crosnoe, 2005; Harris, 2009; Kahlenberg, 2003; Mickelson & Potochnick, 2006).

For many, racial segregation of schools is similarly problematic (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). While the “separate is inherently unequal” doctrine espoused in Brown (1954) isn’t shared by all (Wong & Nicotera, 2004), many nevertheless endorse the racial integration of schools (Scott & Quinn, 2014). First of all, income and wealth in the United States tends to track racial lines, so the rationale for SES-integration is often tied to the rationale for racial integration (Armor & Duck, 2010; Bifulco et al., 2009; Diem, 2012; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Holme & Wells, 2008). Second, racially integrated schools have the potential to facilitate access to social networks that are otherwise foreclosed in segregated schooling spaces (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2012). Finally, racial integration, advocates argue, can promote the highest democratic ideals, helping to mitigate racism and undermine anti-black ideology.

Despite the legacy of Brown (1954), however, recent history shows a plain trend. As Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) write with respect to school racial integration, “In the political arena, [the] game is over” (p. 51). Racial integration of schools is prominent neither in popular discourse, nor in policy discourse; it’s altogether off the radar. Instead, education policy in the United States is marked by a decidedly colorblind or “race-neutral” approach (Frankenburg et al., 2015; Holme & Wells, 2008; Wells, 2014); the Parents Involved (2007) Supreme Court ruling, which disallowed most student assignment plans that seek racial balancing, simply codified an ongoing trend.

But Parents Involved (2007) also presented a policy window, which prompted what Frankenburg and colleagues (2015) call “the new politics of diversity.” A natural alliance formed between those who advocate socioeconomic diversity and those who advocate racial diversity. Both groups have started to endorse socioeconomic integration. Since 2007, a record number of school districts across the country have relied on income-based categories as part of their school assignment procedures (Frankenburg et al., 2015).

In the charter sector, intentional diversity via socioeconomic status has gained similar traction. A group of intentionally diverse charter schools and charter management organizations have begun working to reverse public schooling trends and promote more integrated schooling spaces. Rather than serve exclusively homogenous populations, these schools have incorporated SES-diversity as a central part of the mission, aiming to strategically locate and recruit in order to attract a diverse student population. In 2013 a loose association of such schools formed The National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools (diversecharters.org). Among other things,
members aim to leverage peer-effects and take advantage of other benefits research indicates are associated with integrated schools.

**Methodology and Data Sources**

This study employs mixed-methods to investigate a sample of six (6) intentionally diverse charter organizations (four [4] charter management organizations and two [2] independent charter schools). Twenty-one (21) schools total participated in the study across four states (California, New York, Louisiana, Washington) and Washington D.C. Researchers conducted elite interviews with five (5) CEOs and founders of five organizations, respectively. Additional interviews (13) were conducted with various organization leaders, including one organization vice-president, a director of operations, two (2) directors of recruitment, and a director of professional development. Approximately 4000 surveys were administered to parents, students (grades 6-12), teachers and administrators, with varying participation across the 21 schools. The surveys yielded 2069 responses total (381 parent responses; 257 school staff responses; and 1432 student responses), which will comprise the descriptive data in our study. Survey items aimed to capture stakeholder perceptions of the intentionally diverse model; items also aimed to gauge differences across respondent socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

**Research Findings**

Findings are separated into four research questions presented below, seriatim.

**RQ1: How do charter leaders who operate intentionally diverse charter organizations conceptualize diversity and the value of diversity within their mission and organization?**

Interview data analysis and school mission analysis indicates that participant views can be separated into two broad categories, diversity as end and diversity as means. One set of responses conceptualized diversity as a good in itself. For these participants, diversity represents a broadly democratic ideal and is worth pursuing on its own merits. A second group of participants frame diversity as somewhat subordinate to educational practice. These participants conceptualize diversity as a necessary means to promote and attain higher student academic outcomes.

**RQ2: What strategies and practices do intentionally diverse charter schools employ in order to attract and retain a diverse student population?**

Two participating organizations employed lottery preferences related to income, with one organization using a weighted preference for students with home-address in public housing within a half mile of the school. All of the participating organizations intentionally located in diverse communities in order to attract a more diverse applicant pool. One key counterintuitive finding is that none of the participants in the study deliberately market to, nor recruit more affluent and white communities. All of the recruitment is targeted toward low-income families of color.

**RQ3: In what ways does the national state and local policy context inhibit or facilitate their efforts?**
Most state charter laws related to lottery preferences are ambiguous. California law, for instance, neither expressly proscribes nor explicitly allows an income or free/reduced lunch status preference in the lottery. For many charter organizations, discretion over the use of various lottery preferences is thus left to the charter authorizer. Many states now have laws that require charter school demographics roughly reflect the demographics of the communities in which they are located. Such laws are particularly problematic for schools that locate in homogenous communities. However, we also found that in most instances these laws are loosely and unevenly enforced.

RQ4: How do parents, teachers, administrators and students interpret and perceive practices in schools that aim to deliberately mix students from various backgrounds?

Survey questions asked respondents... (general items that cut across all stakeholders plus example of questions targeted to specific stakeholders).

**Scholarly Significance**

Key findings illustrate that even after the first year of research still much remains unknown about the intentionally diverse charter model. Thus, the scholarly significance of our study is that we have identified a range of questions and hypotheses that could guide future research. For example, we know now that the schools in our sample, for the most part and quite surprisingly, do not pursue professional development around cultural competence, nor do they pursue diversity training for their staff. It seems therefore that many schools in our sample have successfully attracted a diverse student population, but their staff doesn’t have the requisite experience or training to adequately navigate and operate in these more diverse classrooms. A few organizations for the first time are beginning to include cultural competence training as part of their normally scheduled summertime PD activities. Future research needs to investigate further other diverse charter organizations to understand how cultural competence and diversity training are involved in regular staff training practices.

Another key question we have is this. To what extent are parents drawn to the diversity component of the mission? Going into our research we hypothesized that more affluent white families would be disinclined to attend a diverse charter, particularly where better traditional public schooling options are available. But one thing we’ve discovered is that none of the schools practice targeted recruitment into higher income communities, yet they have no trouble attracting higher-income applicants. Part of this, we believe, is because all the schools in our sample tend to enact relatively progressive and innovate pedagogies. Thus it appears that parents might be drawn to these high-achieving schools not because of the diversity mission, but because of the educational methods practiced. Some more affluent parents might even be attracted to these schools in spite of the diversity mission. Our surveys only asked very basic questions about parents’ motivations. But an opportunity to interview parents might better illuminate actual feelings parents have around diversity.

Finally, while our study was able to uncover larger strategies and practices that aim to attract and retain a diverse student population, still much remains unknown about the practices that go on inside classrooms and within the schools walls. For example, are these schools more likely to practice restorative justice? To what degree is tracking going on inside classrooms? And how and to what extent do schools facilitate and promote interaction between families from different backgrounds?
References


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