

Settler Colonialism in School Choice: A Story of Refusal and Survival From a Traditional Public Middle School

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Abstract

In the United States, only several, primarily Mid-Atlantic and Southern states legislate county-based school districts. Florida is one of them, and this legislation has created some of the largest school districts in the country. In order to combat the bureaucracy of large school districts, some smaller communities, such as “Buckland,” have turned to charter schools. In 2003, five of the seven schools in Buckland converted, creating a unique charter school district under one superintendent and one board. Tensions have ensued between the charter schools and the two schools that chose to stay with the county-based district. Using Veracini’s (2011) tenets of settler colonialism as a framework, I discuss how the practice of school choice in Buckland has resulted in the displacement of educators, families, and students, inequality between different racial and socioeconomic groups, and the disappearance of traditional neighborhood schools and their communities. I argue that the system of educational choice in the United States is a result of our history as a settler colonial society.

Keywords: school choice, settler colonialism, charter schools, narrative inquiry

Introduction

The Florida Statutes on charter schools, Fla. Stat. § 1002.33 (2019), claim that competition between schools, whether public, charter, or private, stimulates continual improvement in all schools. Schools in direct competition with one another will add exciting curriculum and programs to entice students and families to choose them. In exchange for greater accountability, charter schools are allowed substantial flexibility in their curriculum and programs. Educational choice existed long before charter schools came into the landscape through private and parochial schools (Harris & Witte, 2011). Many of these schools, however, were unavailable to people of color and/or in lower economic situations. This is why some, like Stulberg (2015), see charter schools as the great educational equalizer for students of color. Most charter schools use a lottery for admission giving students of color equal footing in the ability to enter these new and exciting educational institutions. Others, however, have found that charter schools are actually resegregating students by race and class (Frankenberg, 2009, 2017; Frankenberg et al., 2010). When parents and students get to choose what schools to attend, they tend to choose schools with similar socioeconomic and racial makeup to themselves (Garcia, 2008). Still others question whether or not any school can be to blame regarding segregation. Rowe and Lubinski (2017) suggest that systemic patterns of social residency cause schools to be segregated. The efforts to integrate schools post *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), then, were a futile attempt to address the wrong problem.

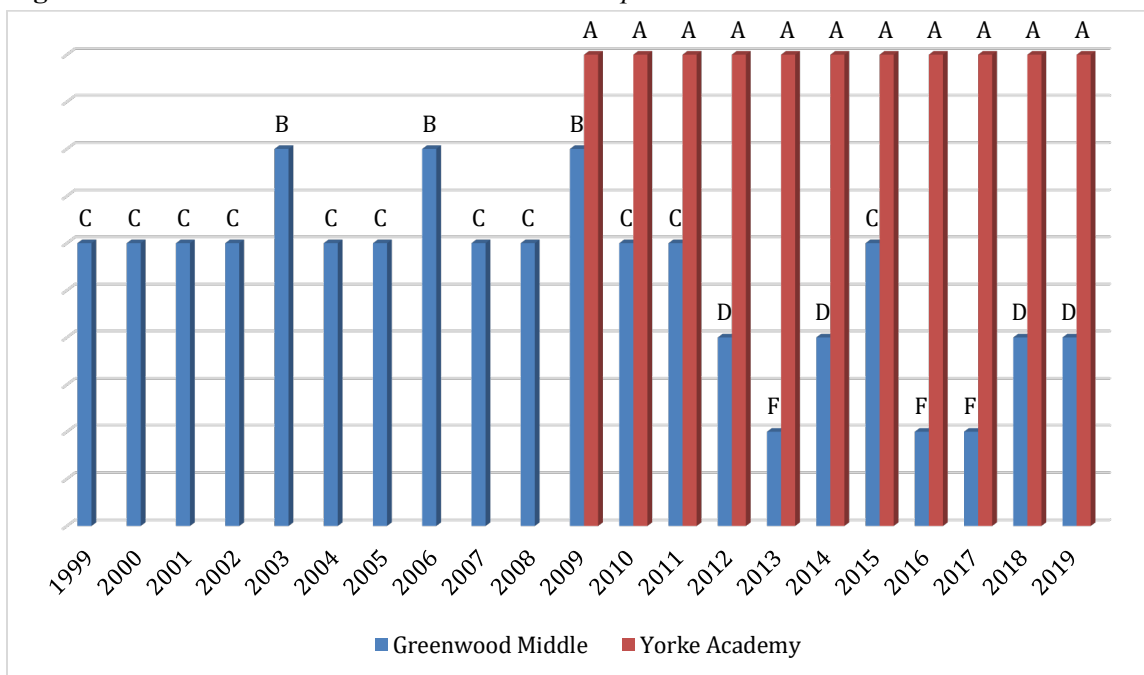
From an Indigenous perspective, charter schools offer a space toward the end goal of self-determinacy. Because of the flexibility provided in charter school curriculum, Indigenous charter schools can address measures of accountability while creating a space for culturally relevant pedagogy. This is not without its caveats, however. While creating room for resistance to settler

society, only “just enough ‘culture’ is allowable, so long as it does not threaten or undermine settler-colonial relations of power” (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2013, p. 8). Additionally, Anthony-Stevens (2013) points out that cultural development does not address the significant growth needed from an accountability stance. Many Indigenously-based charter schools struggle to remain open due to the stranglehold of testing culture on education. Related to the subject of this paper, the relationship between charter schools and Florida’s large county-based school district format presents a microcosm of this aim. The frustrated people of “Buckland,” who felt the needs of their community were being overlooked by the supposed bureaucracy of a massive school district, turned to charter schools in order to self-determine. In this particular case, the charter schools of Buckland look and behave similarly to traditional public schools. There is still a hierarchical structure of power. There are still traditional classrooms with walls. Teachers still lecture and assign group work. Buckland’s secession from the larger district was in name only. Self-determination in Buckland appears to be about power, hardly a value of Indigenous culture.

In 2007, I accepted a position as a music teacher at “Greenwood” Middle School in Buckland and would spend eight years of my educational career there. The larger county district added a fine arts academy at Greenwood because it hoped to entice families and compete with “Yorke” Academy, the startup charter middle school, which would open in 2008. In order to fill the nine-discipline arts department, the fine arts coordinator of Greenwood Middle searched well outside of the district. I had just finished my studies and first year of teaching in Tallahassee when I found the position advertised and called the school. When I arrived in Buckland, I knew little about charter schools or that I would be teaching at the controversial middle school that refused to turn charter with the rest of the schools in Buckland. When Buckland Charter Schools opened Yorke Academy in 2008, the change to Greenwood was immediate. The students who performed proficiently on standardized tests disappeared. The socioeconomic and racial makeup of my classes became poorer and less White in a majority White community.

Potterton (2018) explored an Arizona community grappling with a deregulated market-based school choice system. She found that changes to the district public school’s grade and demographics appeared almost concurrently with the addition of high-profile charter schools to the community. Similarly, after Yorke Academy opened just a few miles south of Greenwood, the grade of Greenwood, a historically B/C school, dropped significantly. As shown in Figure 1, within a few years Greenwood was receiving Ds and Fs on its yearly school grade. My classes became more difficult to teach due to larger numbers of students with special needs and/or behavioral issues. As our grade dropped, we were subjected to greater accountability measures. Groups of people from the district and state levels would frequent our classrooms with clipboards and rubrics, adding further worries to our already stressful position. As teachers, we had to attend greater amounts of professional development and trainings to increase our pedagogical aptitude.

The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of a school that refused to convert despite insistence from its community and the effect of competition and accountability on a traditional neighborhood school. The students, families, teachers, and administrators left behind by the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism on education provide a counternarrative to the supposed success of educational choice in Florida. Throughout this paper, I argue that the system of educational choice in the United States is a result of our history as a settler colony. Ravitch (2010) describes school choice as the application of capitalist principles to education. These capitalist principles have been present in western systems of thought and practice from historical colonialism to contemporary neoliberalism and are interwoven and complicit (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Pradella, 2017). The link between settler colonialism and contemporary capitalism/neoliberalism mirrors the influence of settler colonialism on the current neoliberal educational structure. In this paper, I tell one story of this historical effect.

Figure 1. *Greenwood and Yorke School Grade Comparison 1999–2019*

Theoretical Framework: Settler Colonialism

While there are many thoughts on the doctrine of settler colonialism, I focus on the ideas presented by Veracini (2011) in the introductory essay of the inaugural issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* as a guide for this paper. My reasoning is that Veracini (2011) presents specific criteria (displacement, unequal relationships, and disappearance) that must be met in order for settler colonialism to be at work. It is in these criteria that I argue a structural link between settler colonialism and school choice. Veracini (2011) differentiates between settler colonialism and (regular) colonialism, recognizing that some terms within Indigenous studies (colonialism, settler colonialism, anticolonial, decolonial, Indigenous studies, postcolonial, etc.) have unclear meanings (Andreotti, 2014; Daza & Tuck, 2014; Kauanui, 2016). Although colonialism and settler colonialism are “intimately intertwined,” the perpetrators of each want different things (Veracini, 2011, p. 1). While the colonist desires to exploit the colonized for labor, the settler colonist longs for the colonized to disappear (Veracini, 2011). Disappearance, the “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387), which will extinguish the relationship between the settler and native (Veracini, 2011), can take the form of biological and/or cultural genocide (Wolfe, 2006). In the United States, various means for achieving this goal such as homicide, state-sanctioned miscegenation, the issuing of individual land titles, native citizenship, child abduction, religious conversion, and reprogramming through missions and boarding schools have been used (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

The subject of the land grab is prevalent in school choice scenarios, especially when traditional public schools convert to charter schools or are taken over by the privatized state. In both conversion and startup charter schools and voucher programs funding is moved from the public sphere for private aims. Patel (2014) refers to the practice of seizing land, resources, cultural practices, and goods of a desired location reflective of settler colonial practices in the dismantling of public education.

As one of the last public spaces in the United States, education has experienced a surge of privatization that acts in keeping with a genealogy of land grabs. What were once public schools, with names like Washington Elementary School or Paul J. Robeson High School, are increasingly renamed and claimed for private interests, with many locations simultaneously

claimed and linked through private ownership, under the names of Harlem Children's Zone, Kipp Academy, and MATCH. (Patel, 2014, p. 362)

The systematic eradication of Indigenous people through reliance on blood quantum laws correlates with the systematic eradication of traditional public schooling through the use of accountability (Patel, 2014). In the United States, blood quantum laws were/are used to determine the eligibility of rights and benefits for Native American peoples (Spruhan, 2006). Using terminology like whole blood, half blood, and quarter blood, blood quantum laws measured the "Indianness" of Native individuals. The Stigler Act of 1947, for example, which congress overturned in 2018, said that Native peoples could not inherit the lands of their ancestors if their blood became too far removed (Wingerter, 2018). Indeed, some describe blood quantum laws as a means for the United States to free itself of responsibilities to Indigenous peoples (Spruhan, 2006).

Drawing on a *Washington Post* article by Fenwick (2013), Patel (2014) describes that the settler logic of elimination "is present in the land grabs of public schooling spaces that use the law and metrics of achievement as codified strategies to claim property, specifically through the marginalizing and eroding of histories and place-based knowledges of communities" (p. 363). Although the eradication of traditional public schools may be a hasty conclusion, the complete elimination of Indigenous peoples was/is a gradual process (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). While charter schools are a vehicle for transforming the educational landscape, they have similarities to settler colonialist practices. Likening charter schools to post-colonies, Stern and Hussain (2015) describe them as places of "continual domination by imperial economic and political action" (p. 69) and an instrument for the settler state to police the education of black and brown bodies. In other words, within the scope of the neoliberal deregulation of education, the control of children of color can increase (Stern & Hussain, 2015).

Like charter schools, as reflective of the choice movement and the current ideal vehicle in the move toward privatization of education, choice is temporal. The settler state is now in a period of letting the market control education in order to exert covert supervision over people as consumers. "Despite the rhetoric of independence from bureaucracy and liberation from unions, charter schools set up colonized kids to desire, assimilate into, and reap the benefits of the continual projects of neoimperialism and neocolonialism on the global scale" (Stern & Hussain, 2015, p. 73).

Methodology/Methods

The methodology of this study is narrative inquiry. The reasoning behind this is to highlight my participants' humanness and lived experiences. Also, narrative inquiry is one of the closest methods in Western inquiry to Indigenous ways of understanding and transmitting knowledge. Likening traditional Western inquiry methods to imperialism and colonialism, Bochner (2014) observes, "neutrality, objectivity, and detachment can function as tools of oppression and domination" (p. 265), while Fanon (1963) comments that "for the native, objectivity is always directed against him" (p. 76). In this study, I heed Smith's (2012) call for the Indigenous project of storytelling.

I used interviews and documents as information sources. In some cases, I used my personal experience and stories as well. The participants for this study were former teachers or administrators at Greenwood Middle School with at least five years of service to the school and were employed at any Buckland school during the charter conversion votes in 2003. There were four participants for the interview process. The documents I used in this study were the Florida Statutes on charter schools, the demographic information of the schools in Buckland, the "*Charter School Study*" ("Kelly," 2003) the creators of the charter school system used to present the idea to the community, and local newspaper articles about the issue of school choice.

I conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interviews were in person and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes depending on the length of time it took each participant to answer my questions and tell their story of Greenwood Middle School. I completed the second interviews over

the phone, and they lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured. I ended up combining my planned first and second interview questions for the first interview and asked reflective questions for the telephone follow up. Following Rubin and Rubin (2011), I asked main questions to answer my chief inquiry question and follow-up and probing questions to provide depth, detail, vividness, richness, and nuance.

I contacted or attempted to contact 10 participants I personally knew from my tenure at Greenwood Middle School who met the criteria I stipulated. Several never returned my calls and/or emails. Several responded but did not meet my criteria of time spent at Greenwood or being employed at a Buckland school during the conversion votes. One responded and was willing to participate, but we could not work out a time to meet for an interview. In the end, I had a total of four participants who went through the interview process with me.

The first interviews for “Marybeth,” “Jimmy,” and “Bruce” took place in their homes. I interviewed “Lucy” in her office. Because of my previous collegial relationship with each of them, building rapport and trust was not an issue. Bruce and I would frequently end up at birthday parties for each other’s children over the years. Marybeth, Lucy, and I attended the same church for a while. I would see Jimmy on occasion at the hardware store he worked at as a second job and after he retired. Additionally, I was clear at the start as to the confidential nature of the findings. I let my participants know that their names, names of schools, name of the town, and name of the county would be anonymized. Also, being that three of my participants were no longer employed in education and the other very near retirement, I do not believe they felt pressured to give political answers or that there was going to be any rebuke from employers. During the interviews, I was drawn in by their stories. I learned things about them I never knew and felt that my relationship with them grew stronger. Thus, I believe my participants were open and honest with me from the beginning.

Though I listened to the interviews I recorded on a digital recorder multiple times and even transcribed one of the interviews myself, in the end I paid a professional company, Rev, to transcribe the interviews for me. It was simple, fast, less than 24 hours in all cases, and the transcriptions were nearly 100 percent accurate. Upon receiving the transcriptions, I listened to the interviews and read along, making rare corrections as necessary. I did not use any data analysis software. Rather, I read through and listened to each interview multiple times and pulled pieces and sections of the stories out that were relevant.

I initially wanted to give preference to potential participants based on the longevity of their time at Greenwood. For example, a potential participant who spent 10 years at Greenwood would have a higher probability for selection than one who spent three years at Greenwood. However, as the recruitment process commenced, the amount of time turned out to be inconsequential. Only Marybeth was at Greenwood for less than 10 years, but because of her service at “Harlond” Elementary, another Buckland school, that combined to make about 30 years of service to Buckland schools. The other three participants were each employed at Greenwood for over 25, 22, and 15 years.

The participants of this study were employed in Buckland schools during the 2003 and 2005 charter school conversion votes as teachers or administrators and spent at least five years at Greenwood Middle School. Three, Bruce, Jimmy, and Lucy, were at Greenwood Middle during the time of conversion votes and one, Marybeth, was at Harlond Elementary. All the participants lived and worked in Buckland for significant portions of their lives and understood the culture of the town. Two of the participants, Bruce and Jimmy, still live in Buckland and the other two reside outside the general area. None of my participants currently work in public education. Jimmy, Marybeth, and Lucy have retired, and Bruce is employed in another industry.

Marybeth grew up in Louisiana and was a music teacher in Buckland for almost two decades. In 2003, she voted in favor of charter conversion at Harlond Elementary School citing that much of the charter school rhetoric circulating in Buckland made sense. It was not long, however, before she

became apprehensive of charter schools. Marybeth realized she was caught up in the excitement of new ventures and quickly learned that charter schools were not all they promised. She missed the resources and camaraderie of being with the county school district and began devising a return to the larger district. In 2006, she accepted a position at Greenwood Middle School to coordinate the newly founded arts academy. She held that position until 2014 when the county abandoned the fine arts academy at Greenwood, and she moved to the district arts department for the remainder of her career.

Bruce, originally from New York City, moved to Buckland to attend college. He completed his internship at Greenwood Middle and would go on to teach social studies at the school for the next 15 years. The initial Buckland charter conversion vote occurred during Bruce's first year of teaching. He told me he did not participate in the charter conversion votes because he felt uncertain of charter school benefits. Bruce also recollected being uncomfortable with the division the charter school debate had created at Greenwood Middle School and Buckland at large. Faculty meetings were vehement and created a rift in the culture of the school.

Jimmy spent his first few years of life in Canada and moved to Florida when he was in second grade. He became an art teacher at Greenwood Middle School in 1985 and stayed there until his retirement in 2010. He would teach for another year and a half at Yorke Academy, the charter school in direct competition with Greenwood Middle. In 2003 and 2005, Jimmy voted in favor of charter conversion at Greenwood and mentioned the "stink eye" he would get from his anti-charter colleagues in faculty meetings and as he would pass them in the halls.

Lucy was employed for 22 years of her career at Greenwood Middle School as a teacher and administrator. During the charter conversion debate, she was an administrator and, therefore, ineligible to vote. She told me that administrators were supposed to remain neutral during the process, but that it was difficult to do. She was unconvinced of the charter school rhetoric in Buckland and was relieved when Greenwood teachers rejected conversion.

Adding another layer to my approach I made use of documents. Of particular concern to this study are the Florida Statutes on charter schools, the demographic information of Greenwood Middle School, the *Charter School Study* (Kelly, 2003) the creators of the charter school system initially used to present the idea to the public, and various local newspaper articles about the issue of school choice within the town and the county at large.

The Florida Statutes on charter schools are clear in their purpose about how charter schools are to function in the communities they serve. Of particular importance from Indigenous and critical lenses, is what the statutes say regarding social justice. In order to check for compliance in this area, I analyzed the demographic information of the two schools, Greenwood and Yorke, and the community and compared the three for any discrepancies or violations of statutory mandates. Also, I requested documentation from Yorke Academy as to how it accepts students, because, unlike most charter schools, Yorke does not use a lottery for open seats. I never received documentation from the school.

Using the report *Charter School Study* (Kelly, 2003), I analyzed the rationale behind the push to pursue the creation of a charter school district and what a charter district would look and act like in the town. "Kevin Kelly" is an attorney and longstanding community leader in Buckland. He wrote the document, to present a possible way that Buckland could monitor its schools more closely, to the Buckland Chamber of Commerce. I also used the study to inform interviews. For example, the claim about Buckland not receiving its fair share of funding from the district or the desire not to create elitist charter schools. Adding local newspaper accounts from the same period, I was able to describe what the debate was like between differing camps—pro-charter group and anti-charter group. However, deconstructing this further perhaps would show groups of people who were undecided, did not care, or were even unaware of the situation, among other possibilities. I had a fairly even representation of possibilities based on my participants. There were two who voted for conversion,

one who would have voted against conversion had she not been an administrator, and one who abstained from voting.

Although the above hints at the notion of triangulation in this study, in analyzing the data, I kept in mind Ellingson's (2009, 2011) term "crystallization," which she denotes as a postmodern approach to triangulation. The triangle, Ellingson (2011) says, is too indicative of a two-dimensional scientific shape; a shape that suggests positivist terms like rigor and validity. Like bricolage, the crystal invokes a multidimensional, multifaceted approach, not only to methodology, but to analysis as well. Crystallization, Ellingson (2009) states,

combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

As I assessed the quality of this study, I kept in mind the multiple realities I suggested as I laid out the methodological underpinnings of this work. While it presented difficulty in leaving out positivist methods of categorization and coding that my Westernized mind seems to naturally want to do, I desired to tell the most representative story of the numerous realities involved as I could. Differing accounts create a more feasible version of events. Additionally, as a proponent of reflexivity, my thoughts, biases, and desires are noted throughout this study.

I engaged in crystallization by using multiple forms of analyses, i.e., narrative analysis from a sociocultural perspective and discourse analysis from a Foucauldian power relationship perspective, and multiple genres of representation, i.e., interviews, documents, and self-reflexivity. In defining different pieces of the crystal, I created one account of the situation in Buckland, while understanding that what I wrote is only a miniscule part of the story. Throughout the writing, I attempted to make my biases clear and offered vulnerability and positionality as a postmodernist who incorporates "the views of others with [my] views which are represented through [my] own lens but with transparency of process" (Grbich, 2013, p. 114).

Findings

Acknowledging the Indigenous Inhabitants of Buckland

Long ago the place in which Greenwood Middle School exists served other purposes. The vanished Timucua tribe likely populated this area well before ideas like the United States and K–12 education came to exist. The settler colonial practices that resulted in the removal of Indigenous people and their ways of knowing did not end after the United States finished acquiring territory through the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The practice of settler colonialism is still active in the United States disguised as capitalism and neoliberalism (Arvin et al., 2013; Baker, 2017; Burns et al., 2016; Shahjahan, 2011; Stern & Hussain, 2015; Vimalassery et al., 2016). In Buckland, for instance, Greenwood Middle School continues to be a front for educational competition. The Florida Statutes on school choice, Fla. Stat. § 1002.33 (2019), claim that competition between schools, whether public, charter, or private stimulates continual improvement in all schools. This bold claim presupposes a ceaseless educational bull market where every school somehow thrives. As experienced in Florida, however, the number of schools falling below acceptable levels of performance on flawed accountability metrics draws serious doubts as to the accuracy of this claim, especially in scenarios like the subject of this paper.

We Want Our Fair Share!

In the *Charter School Study* for Buckland, Kevin Kelly (2003), a community leader, claimed being slighted by the county school district in funding. The monetary lack for Buckland schools, Kelly claimed, was the reason for the degradation and poor performance of its educational system. The local newspaper of the time echoed this sentiment in a chorus of stories about how Buckland was not receiving its fair share of funding from the school board. The rhetoric influenced the community of Buckland. Many residents and educators in Buckland began to support a charter system that offered reprieve from the frustration. Touting local control, the designers proposed to take back Buckland's educational system from a corrupt governmental bureaucracy. The discussion in the local newspaper and the *Charter School Study* anticipated a return to an idyllic past, when Buckland was a bustling citrus capital and its wealthy and prestigious residents made decisions in the best interest of their city, not politicians from other areas of the county.

Kelly (2003) implied that taking control of schools might help bring tranquility back. That history, however, would show a segregated past. When he first moved to Buckland in the late 1970s, Jimmy noticed the townspeople were more prejudiced with people of color than in Tampa, where he studied art education at University of South Florida. During Jimmy's first year of teaching in Buckland, he remembered discussion around the school of a Ku Klux Klan rally happening at a nearby cemetery. Shocked, Jimmy voiced his concern to another teacher who warned him not to talk negatively about the KKK around Buckland, even at school. Similarly, Bruce spoke of being taken aback when one of his colleagues at Greenwood told him that she attended "Rivendell" High, the African American high school in Buckland, during segregation. Originally from New York, Bruce said it was hard to believe that a person not too much older than him was intentionally segregated by race in Buckland. He believes that mentality is still alive in the town. While Kelly (2003) described the desegregation of Buckland schools as peaceful, with willful compliance by both Black and White townspeople, a dissertation on desegregation efforts in the county claims the community was in a state of civil emergency (Anthony-Stevens, 2013).

Buckland charter school promoters desired to improve schools that had been neglected for years by the county school board. Although county school board members maintained funding was being allocated fairly to Buckland, the *Charter School Study* and debate in Buckland had its intended effect. During 2003, the town's teachers and parents voted on whether or not to convert their schools to charter schools. In order to convert a public school to charter status in Florida, first a majority of the teachers at the school must approve of the conversion in a secret ballot vote. Once that is confirmed, a majority of the parents of students attending the school must approve the conversion. At five of the seven Buckland schools, both teachers and parents concurred in converting their school to charter status. This created the first conversion charter school system in Florida. Marybeth remembered being part of the vote. While she was a music teacher at Harlond Elementary in Buckland, charter school promoters gave presentations on charter schools to sell the idea to the staff. She affirms that the district did not seem to be allocating as much funding to Buckland as they were seeing in other areas of the county, especially the more populated areas. Marybeth's daughter was attending Buckland High School and the gym was falling apart. The buildings of Buckland schools, in general, were in a state of disrepair. Marybeth said she and her colleagues were excited about the possibility of being able to better monitor the needs of Buckland schools.

After the initial conversion votes, one of the elementary schools and Greenwood Middle School voted not to convert and remained under the control of the county school district. The elementary school's teachers voted overwhelmingly to reject charter conversion, 31–10. The elementary school was the first to reject conversion after four other schools voted to leave the county district. The president of the county teacher union stated the reason was lack of information about working conditions and what would happen to students who needed alternative education. The local newspaper reported that although the charter school steering committee promised more community involvement, one teacher

wondered why the community was not already involved. The teacher was not sold on the idea that charter conversion would cause the community to become more involved in its schools.

Rather than dwelling on the schools that did not convert, Buckland charter school leaders moved forward with the ones that did. They created a nonprofit and secured almost a half million dollars in pledges and donations. The five schools that voted to convert had to submit applications for charter status to the school board. Kelly said that they would appeal to the state board of education—which was charter friendly at the time—if the applications were rejected by the county school board. One county school board member, who had previously served on a charter school board, said she saw charter schools as a positive challenge to public schools. Even a state senator from the area voiced an opinion:

I think the effort, at least as I understand it today, is exactly what we intended to do when we made the adjustment of the charter school act two years ago. I think they have the opportunity to really make their schools better.

Greenwood Refuses

Greenwood Middle School refused charter conversion, officially, in 2003 (34–17) and in 2005 (41–26). The deliberation wore heavily on the faculty and staff. Some became uncomfortable at work. Lucy, a Greenwood assistant principal at the time, explained that one of the reasons the teachers refused to convert was because several years earlier, before the citywide charter votes, Greenwood teachers had independently considered conversion to a charter school. The principal of Greenwood at the time was pushing the idea on the teachers. He brought in representatives from charter schools in the county to encourage the idea. One of the reasons the principal was interested in charter conversion for Greenwood was because he wanted a greater say in where monies were allocated. Lucy remembered the principal literally saying, “I want to control the money. *I want to control the money.*” In 2002, the same principal of Greenwood who wanted to control the money was terminated for embezzling school funds.

Lucy suggested that by the time the Buckland charter movement began, the teachers at Greenwood were weary of rejecting the idea and related it to their former principal who viewed students as dollar signs. When the second official Greenwood refusal came about in 2005, Bruce, a Greenwood teacher, recalled one irritated teacher presenting a motion at a faculty meeting to hold a vote to never vote on conversion again. After this final refusal, the charter district turned to creating its own startup charter middle school. Kelly said the teachers at Greenwood Middle were obviously entrenched in their views and not worth pursuing any further. At least one of the reasons Greenwood teachers overwhelmingly voted against conversion was fear of losing their jobs, benefits, and retirement plans.

Bruce explained that there were a lot of Greenwood teachers close to retirement who were worried about losing their retirement and benefits. After Buckland High School teachers voted for conversion, the charter school district terminated several veteran teachers. This action created enough uncertainty among Greenwood teachers to finally quash the conversion. Referring to the charter school district, Bruce remembered they “cleaned house” pretty quickly. Similarly, Marybeth recollected the post-charter conversion terminations of 11 teachers from Buckland High. The sentiment at Greenwood, she explained, when it was time for the second vote was wondering “which 11 of us are going to lose our jobs?” Marybeth stated that there have been problems in education with tenured teachers not doing their jobs. However, this issue was not as big as some believed. Jimmy did not think the teachers’ concerns about losing their jobs were warranted. He explained that a lot of teachers were against the charter because they simply did not want the change. There were rumors that a principal could simply fire a teacher on a whim. But Jimmy believed that if a teacher did their job then they were safe.

In the *Charter School Study*, Kelly (2003) describes veteran teachers as apprehensive of the unknown. In 2003, charter schools were still a fairly new concept, at least in practice. It makes sense, then, that veteran teachers were concerned with due process. The county newspaper corroborated Marybeth's story that 11 teachers at Buckland High School were terminated immediately following the charter conversion, adding to a total of 20 teachers and seven paraprofessionals who did not have their contract renewed throughout the newly created charter system after its first year in existence. They received a two-line letter that said, "Thank you for your service for the 2004–2005 school year. However, you will not be returning for the 2005–2006 school year." One of the terminated teachers, who had been a Teacher of the Year winner and finalist for district Teacher of the Year the previous year, emailed an open letter to the entire staff of Greenwood Middle School notifying them of dubious behavior by the charter district and urging them to consider staying with the county school district.

The multiple votes against conversion by the middle school were especially troublesome for the founders as it squashed the dream for a seamless, K–12, locally controlled school system in Buckland. It would not be long, however, before plans were in the works to create a startup charter middle school that would complete this goal. Yorke Academy, the charter district's middle school, opened to students in 2008. I recall a hallway conversation with a teacher at Greenwood during the 2007–2008 school year in which he told me that he was leaving Greenwood to teach at Yorke Academy. "We've been waiting for this a long time," he told me. At the time, I did not understand the significance and repercussions of what he was saying to me. After opening, the enrollment of Yorke Academy quickly exceeded capacity and created a lengthy waiting list. Buckland Charter Schools, eager for more land, would devise ways to take over Greenwood Middle School. Florida educational law allows for the takeover of consistently failing schools by an outside educational agency, a charter school system, or charter conversion. Despite repeated attempts at taking over Greenwood, from multiple conversion votes to requests and demands to the county school district to simply hand the school over to the charter district, the faculty of Greenwood have consistently refused conversion and resisted hostile takeover. Kelly and the charter school district, however, remained steadfast in emphasizing innocent reasons for wanting to acquire Greenwood: to have a unified charter school district in Buckland where all students enter life on equal footing.

"Bobby Phillips," an outspoken member of the district school board, refers to the situation in Buckland as a cynical Triangle Trade. He believes Buckland Charter Schools imports easier/elite students from outside its community and exports harder/poorer students from inside its community. Phillips says the county schools act as a backstop for Buckland Charter Schools, ensuring the success of the charter schools. Because charter schools in Florida are not zoned schools, they are able to take students from both within and without their community. Although Buckland Charter Schools claims that its converted schools serve those students and families within the pre-conversion attendance zones set by the county school district, startup charter schools like Yorke Academy serve those they select from a surrounding area with arbitrary lines of demarcation. Lucy commented that the repeated attempts by Buckland Charter Schools to take over Greenwood has worn down the community. She hears Greenwood supporters sigh and say Greenwood should just give up and say yes. However, she keeps fighting because she believes the only reason Buckland Charter Schools wants Greenwood is for the building. They do not want the kids we serve, she said. If they did, they would have accepted them already. She wonders what will happen to the students in Buckland without a school.

Art Always Tells the Truth, Even When It's Lying

In 2007, the year before the charter middle school was set to open, I was hired to teach music at Greenwood Middle School. I was brought in with several other teachers to begin a new arts academy at Greenwood in which students would choose a major in the arts from nine different areas of focus: music (band, chorus, orchestra, guitar), visual art (2D, 3D, graphic arts), dance, and theatre. Core

curriculum at Greenwood, additionally, was slated to be infused with the arts. Participants in this study and Kelly (2003) of the *Charter School Study* suggested the importance of the arts to the residents of Buckland. The thriving Buckland Arts Center, additionally, is a testament to Buckland's valuing of the arts. As Kelly (2003) addresses potential curriculum direction in his charter school endeavor he notes "the curriculum should address and challenge academically gifted students in addition to children who are talented in the arts" (p. 8).

Kelly (2003) also suggests the residents of Buckland were bitter about losing some of their top musicians and artists to an auditioned arts high school in a nearby town. When the district began competing with charter schools in Buckland, it surely seemed to understand the importance of the arts as a way to attract students to Greenwood Middle School. Despite the apparent importance of the arts in the charter district's plan, the arts did not seem to flourish in Buckland's charter schools. I particularly recall band teachers at Buckland High School being especially vulnerable. It seemed almost yearly during my tenure at Greenwood a Buckland High band teacher was being terminated. Five different band directors worked there from 2013–2019. Marybeth told me there were only two certified music teachers in the four charter elementary schools and zero certified art teachers. She suggested that one of the reasons for the lack of strong music programs at Buckland High was the insufficient attention given to music at the charter district elementary level.

Erasing Greenwood From Buckland

Post charter conversion, and especially after the opening of Yorke Academy, the general consensus from Buckland community members and media outlets as to the status of Greenwood Middle School has not been positive. Somewhere after charter conversions took place in Buckland, Greenwood seemed to become a scapegoat. There appeared to be a backlash from the community and Greenwood became forgotten. Some members of the community, whether through information deficiency or simply apathy, were unaware of the barrage of funding pumped into Greenwood by the district and the comprehensive arts programs started at the school. Many times, while directing music performances of my students in the Buckland community, I would have community leaders and members approach me and say they never knew Greenwood had these kinds of programs. In my analysis of the top newspaper in the county, there was very little mention of the arts academy at Greenwood. The local newspaper in Buckland was, to put it mildly, harsh in its treatment of Greenwood. With headlines like "Greenwood Gets an F" and "Greenwood: Conform to Uniform," the Buckland newspaper seemingly circulated exaggerated information to portray Greenwood Middle School as a failing, prison-like educational institution.

The Hoity-Toity of Buckland

One of the troubles Kelly (2003) cites in the consensus of Buckland community educational concerns is that all schools and all students and families should gain from a charter school system within the town. Enthusiasm for the project would wane if they created one or two elitist schools. In the case of Yorke Academy and its comparison to Greenwood, however, this concern does not appear to have been implemented. In her role as assistant principal at Greenwood, Lucy observed a literal skimming of higher performing students from Greenwood to Yorke. Every year she would see the list of incoming sixth graders and be excited about the "really strong kids" enrolling at Greenwood. But then, the "upper crust is pulled away" and "one by one they were taken off" her list. Lucy revealed that Yorke Academy might take a "one or a two" to begin with, but after the October FTE those students would start showing up at Greenwood, dismissed from Yorke for not making the grade or doing something behaviorally egregious.

Lucy also explained that at Buckland High School they put every student in Honors or International Baccalaureate classes. Some students cannot perform at that intensity level and end up getting dismissed. At the high school level, the practices of Buckland Charter Schools are even more

problematic because students who are released from the only high school in town have to be bussed by the county school district to high schools in other areas of the county. Lucy suggested that segregation occurs, not only by race and class as much of the literature describes, but also by ideals in this charter school scenario. It is almost as if places like Yorke Academy are looking for students who fit into a certain disposition. Jimmy said they actually advertise for the “smarter kids.” Lucy lamented parents who self-segregate their children as failing to prepare them for a world of difference.

And then their children don't know how to deal with those kinds of kids. You know what I'm saying? You segregate yourself out so... You're not always going to be protected. What are you going to do when you get to college and ooh there's [the] other, or you get out in the workplace and there are people who are different from you, who think different than you, who don't have the same values or ideals that you do, how are you going to deal with that conflict? And I just think it's really sad. It takes all of us to live in this world. Not just the hoity-toities. You know?

Lucy believes we learn democratic resolution to conflict with others in public schools. As a teacher at Greenwood, Bruce recounted a specific instance of a student getting dismissed from Yorke that was potentially a violation of the law. When students have IEPs, by law, the school must honor them. In this particular instance, the student, who happened to have straight As, also had oppositional defiant disorder. This was clearly stated in his IEP. Rather than meet his accommodations, however, Yorke Academy dismissed the student.

Discussion

Segregation

The story of Greenwood lends substantiation to the broad finding in the literature that school choice segregates students by race and class (Frankenberg, 2009, 2017; Frankenberg et al., 2010). Additionally, one participant in this study suggested that segregation occurs by ideology. This idea connects to the proposal that school segregation occurs because of larger, structural flaws in the United States (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). The original desegregation efforts tried to resolve this quandary through the formation of magnet schools and forced bussing. These aspirations were futile due to structural systems of segregation. Ideologically, based on Lucy's observations, there are those who value interchange with those different from themselves and those who do not. Those who do not, Lucy suggested, want to enroll their children in segregated charter schools. Whatever may be the case in our schools, coming in to contact with people and groups of differing backgrounds is almost certain.

Still, Stulberg (2015) argues charter schools are the completion of educational civil rights. One of the explanations is that charter schools can benefit marginalized communities due to their capacity to self-determine (Davis & Oakley, 2013; Lipman & Haines, 2007). In the case of Buckland, however, it does not appear as if charter schools are better serving the needs of students of color. If anything, the charter schools of Buckland are doing the opposite. My participants were distinctly aware that the racial and socioeconomic makeups of Greenwood Middle and Yorke Academy, despite serving the same area, are suspiciously inconsistent in comparison. In Figures 2–4, I draw attention to the racial and economic variability between the schools; something I noticed during my tenure at Greenwood from 2007–2015. While the charter schools of Buckland do not identify as being ethnically focused, the disparity of service to students of color and/or with special needs, especially at Yorke Academy, is alarming. In my neighborhood, 15 miles away, I continue to see Buckland Charter School busses picking up students for Yorke Academy; yet still there are children within Buckland who are either on a waiting list or simply denied a place at the school.

Figure 2: Greenwood Middle School Racial Demographic Percentages 2007-2019

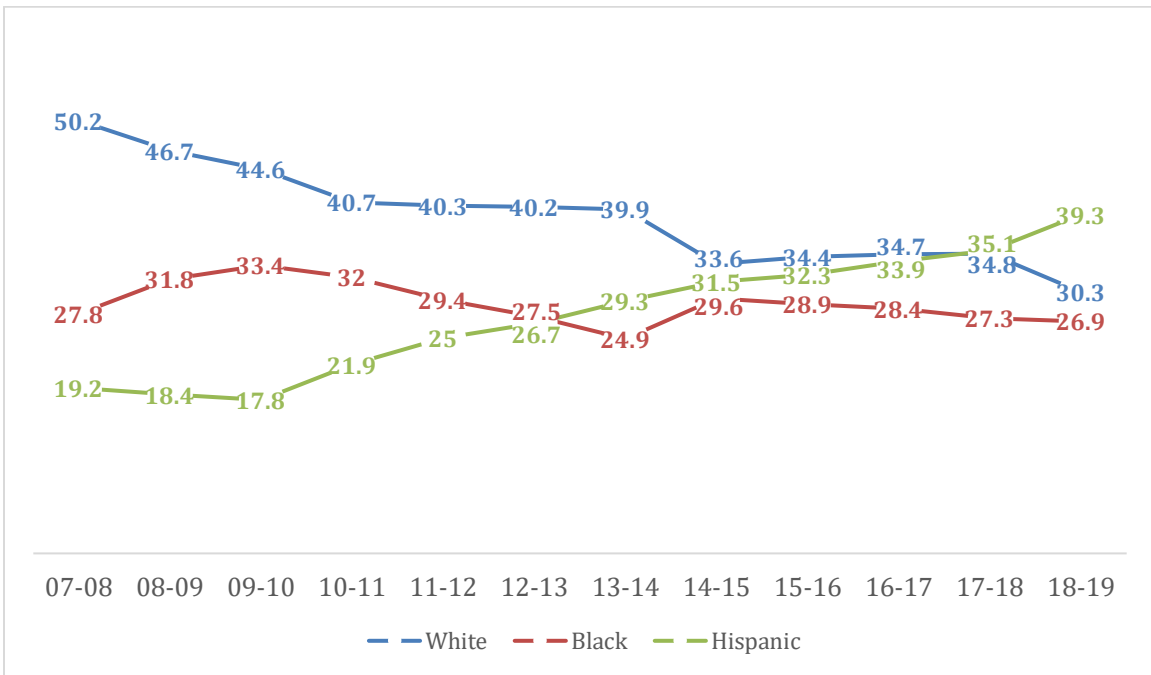


Figure 3: Yorke Academy Racial Demographic Percentages 2008-2019

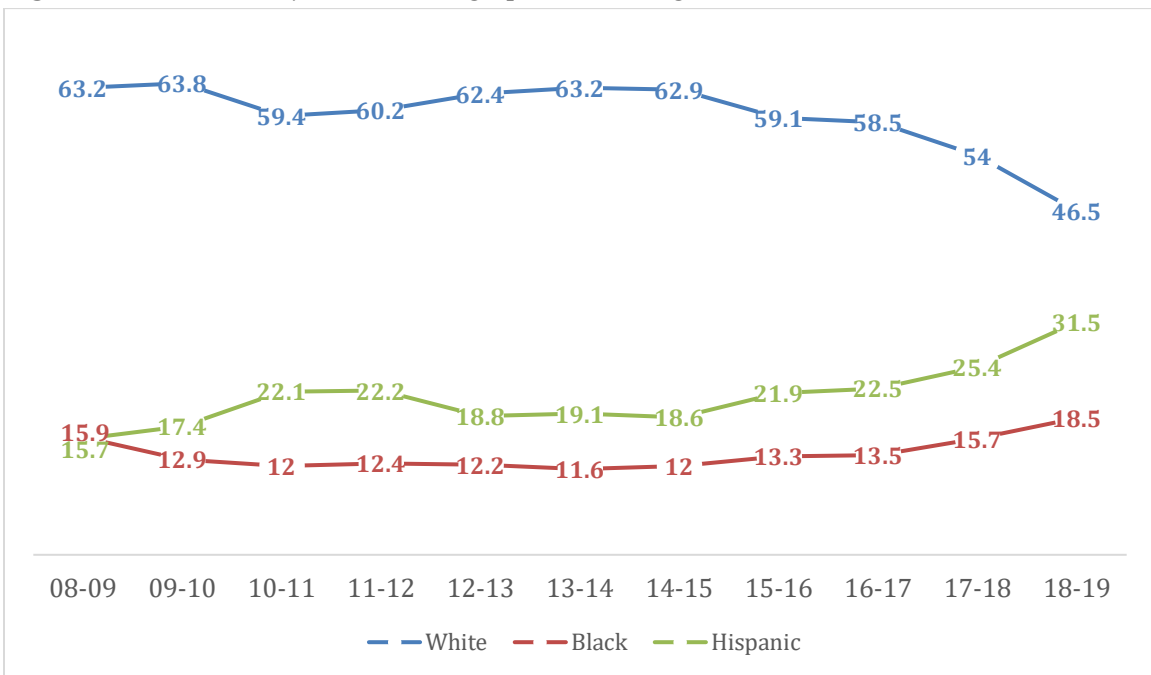
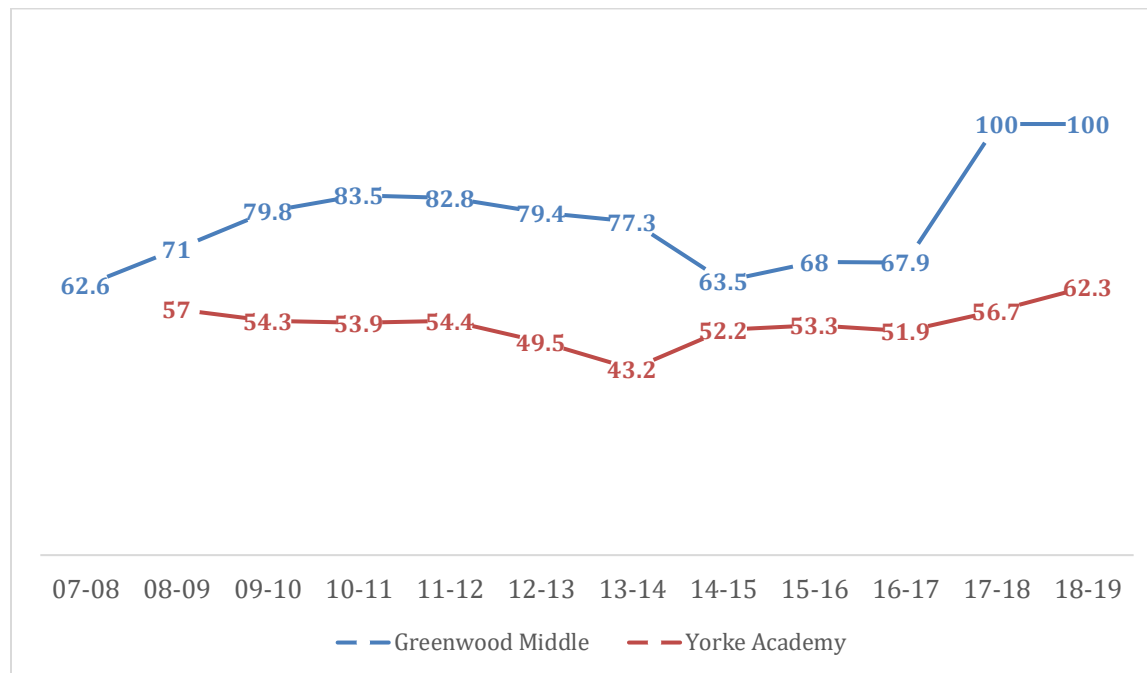


Figure 4: *Greenwood Middle School and Yorke Academy Economically Disadvantaged Percentages 2007–2019*



This brings me to a troubling conclusion that Buckland Charter Schools failed in its initial promise of not creating elitist schools. Yorke Academy is an elitist school receiving public funding yet does not serve the public in an equitable fashion. Carroll and Gaztambide-Fernández (2016) describe how students who attend charter schools are viewed and view themselves as a new type of elite. “Although these ‘choice schools’ are not equivalent to traditional elite private schools, the students who attend them become valued as elites within the framework of selective public schools. This privileging is made possible by neoliberal discourses that promote competition, choice and mobility” (Carroll & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2016, p. 344). Not only are the students who attend Yorke Academy mostly White, then, they are even more privileged as elites. The students at Greenwood, on the other hand, attend a school that is legally required to accept them.

The Florida Statutes are clear that charter schools must address how they will achieve racial balance with the community they serve (Fla. Stat. § 1002.33, 2019). Furthermore, the statutes stipulate that charter schools must use a lottery system when applications for the charter school exceed the number of available seats. In these two ways, it appears that Buckland Charter Schools is infringing upon Florida Statutes, especially at Yorke Academy. There is no lottery system at Yorke. Parents and students fill out applications and a point system is used to determine acceptance. A committee convenes each year and awards extra points to students who attended one of the charter elementary schools. Those students who attended the district elementary school, which also educates those students not accepted and dismissed from the charter elementary schools, are even less likely to garner acceptance into Yorke Academy. It is unclear at this time whether or not the county school district or the State of Florida is holding charter schools in Buckland accountable to Florida laws. Because of the repeated patterns of social justice violations over a significant period of time, presumably, there have been no consequences. When charter schools appear successful, it adds fodder to neoliberal educational practices in Florida and allows attacks against the supposedly failing public school system to continue. All of my participants expressed their frustration with the perceived injustice being done to the students of Buckland. The known segregatory effects of charter schools

coupled with elitism and unclear selection practices combine to create a damning system of inequality in Buckland, one of the three tenets of settler colonialism.

Stories of Resistance

Thalhammer et al. (2007) describe collective resistance as occurring when a group of people choose to challenge perceived injustice together. Communal resistance, one form of collective resistance, refers “to those cases where ongoing relationships are established or deepened, and individuals coordinate their efforts to confront injustice” (Thalhammer et al., 2007, p. 92). Whatever the reason for the refusal of and resistance to charter conversion and takeover, the teachers of Greenwood have stood steadfastly together against what they perceive as injustice. Despite different periods of time, different sets of teachers and circumstances, the collective of Greenwood have repeatedly refused charter conversion. At the beginning of the resistance, it seems that the bulk of the reasoning for this collective resistance was apprehension of losing job security and collective bargaining rights. As time went on, however, the resistance became less about teachers losing jobs and more about social justice; serving the needs of students of color and of lower socioeconomic status in an equitable way has become a mantra for those still resisting.

This shift in thinking represents a collective learning about the effects of charter schools. In the early 2000s, the segregatory consequences of charter schools were likely unknown by a majority of the populace. Now that the power of collective bargaining and teacher unions in traditional school districts is diminished, the idea that teachers might be using social justice as a cover over selfish concerns about job security is likely incorrect. Along with the growth of charter schools and privatization in general has come the simultaneous collapse of worker’s unions. With Florida being a right to work and at will employment state, teachers have little in the way of collective rights. As explained in this story, teachers have been terminated without justification since the beginning of Buckland Charter Schools. Once teachers realized that there was little they could do to protect their jobs, their focus developed to include matters of social justice for their students. Regardless of the religious or political background of my participants, each expressed a belief in an equal and equitable education for all students. The continuous resistance and perseverance of Greenwood teachers against closure or takeover has so far prevented the disappearance of their community school, its culture, and its students as a communal group.

Settler Colonialism in Buckland

Veracini (2011) describes the three necessary elements of settler colonialism as displacement, inequality, and disappearance. While the concept of settler colonialism can be applied metaphorically to school choice scenarios, for example the disappearance of the public sphere, there are concrete examples of the principles of settler colonialism at work in Buckland and its schools. My participants told stories about the displacement of 20 employees of Buckland Charter Schools within the first year of its existence. Also, there are many students in Buckland who applied to attend Yorke Academy and were not accepted or were accepted and dismissed from the school at a later time. These students became displaced into their zoned school, Greenwood. My participants and the local newspaper described how the charter system wants to take over Greenwood Middle. Lucy was adamant that Buckland Charter Schools only wants to take over Greenwood because they need the building, the land, and the resources. Patel (2014) connects the land grabs of public spaces by charter schools as corresponding to settler colonialism.

There are high school students in Buckland who, for whatever reason, have been denied admittance or ousted from Buckland High and must be bussed by the county district to high schools outside of Buckland. This is indicative of what might happen to some middle schoolers in Buckland should Greenwood be closed. If Buckland Charter Schools takes over Greenwood, there would be some students without a middle and/or high school to attend in their hometown. The displacement and

scattering of Buckland students represent a settler colonialist mentality. In order to gain maximum profit out of the land and its school, those students deemed undesirable must be eliminated. Metrics used in standardized testing and other accountability systems measure the intellect of students much in the same way that blood quantum laws impact(ed) Indigenous people (Patel, 2014). Students no longer seem to be seen as flesh and blood human beings; rather, they are treated as data and numbers used to measure value. Even my participants were quick to refer to students by their achievement levels: ones, twos, threes, and so forth. It is the language of education.

Within the idea of displacement is the meaning of place. The founders of Buckland Charter Schools drew on a neoconservative idea of a return to an idyllic time of education. Their recollection of the schools of their youth seemed to have forgotten, among other issues, the segregated past of education. The segregatory practices of charter schools in Buckland ironically represent the neoconservative return. The memory of the Buckland elite, in this situation, is not serving ostracized groups in the town. Patel (2014) describes the erosion of histories and place-based knowledge as a desire of settler colonists. Using charter schools as a vehicle for this return to an ideal past, then, is eroding the history and place-based knowledge of residents of color in Buckland.

Based on participant stories and my own recollection, inequality is the most obvious of the three settler colonialism tenets at work in Buckland. In the segregated system of Buckland—especially in the dichotomy between Greenwood and Yorke—elite schools with mostly White, middle and upper class, abled enrollments are juxtaposed against “inferior” schools with higher enrollments of students of color, from lower-class backgrounds, and with special needs. The sweeping racial imbalances in school choice scenarios reveal structural inequalities lodged in these policies (Rodriguez, 2017). Schools are segregated because of larger patterns of residential segregation (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). Because of self-segregation in residence and on Sunday mornings, it should make sense that schools serving segregated communities would themselves be segregated. However, in the case of Buckland, where much of the community is packed closely together and historically one middle school did serve the town, it seems that the racial makeup of its schools would reflect the larger community. This reflection is mandated in the Florida statutes.

Before Yorke Academy opened, there was at least resemblance of racial consistency between the town of Buckland and Greenwood Middle. After Yorke opened, neither Greenwood nor Yorke would resemble the racial makeup of the community they serve. The segregated past of Buckland and the history of the Ku Klux Klan in the town seem to explain a continued discomfort with the intermingling of races. The racial divide between Greenwood and Yorke appears to move the middle school education of Buckland closer to pre-integration status. However, the “forced bussing” of high school students not accepted at Buckland High to other areas of the county is counterintuitive to some complaints during integration. Jimmy spoke to the prejudice he found in Buckland and noticed a racial and socioeconomic discrepancy between Greenwood and Yorke, yet still voted for charter conversion of Greenwood Middle. In 2003, however, when the first charter votes took place in Buckland, those voting were likely unaware of the segregatory effects of charter schools. Marybeth, who also voted for conversion, was resentful when she discovered that charter schools were both not living up to their promises and compounding inequality in Buckland. She was hopeful that true change would come to education in the town she called home. Marybeth’s decision to return to the county district speaks to her belief that education should be equal and equitable to all children.

Although the rise of neoliberalism has come with a promotion of deregulation, in education regulation has actually increased through accountability (Dougherty & Henig, 2016; Smrekar & Crowson, 2015). The practice of neoliberalism pushes toward private control of public spaces. The local control argument that some charter advocates advance that give rise to picturesque notions of the one room schoolhouses of a century ago, is faulty because locally controlled boards have little control over structural phenomena in education such as national standardization of curriculum and performance metrics (Smrekar & Crowson, 2015). When the schools of Buckland converted to charter schools,

essentially, they began leaving the public sphere. Within the idea of public, at least in my understanding, is a foundational quality of serving all people equally and equitably regardless of race, class, ability, religion, gender, sexual orientation, et cetera. While, again, this disappearance of public spaces appears to be metaphoric, the constant threat of the takeover and/or closure of Greenwood Middle School is anything but a metaphor.

Schools like Greenwood are put on probation by the state when their performance falls below acceptable quality on flawed grading scales. Generally, they are given two or three years to “turnaround” or face any number of consequences, including being closed, turned over to an outside educational management company (sometimes from other states), or converted into a charter school. Although the school building would still be in existence in many scenarios, what was once valued and culturally relevant to the community it served might no longer exist. It is the settler colonist’s desire to take over the land and resources through whatever means necessary, including cultural genocide (Wolfe, 2006). The disappearance of non-settler culture is consistent in Buckland. Although my participants believe Greenwood Middle School has been under scrutiny for decades, accountability and charter schools have only worsened attacks on the school. It is only a matter of time, I fear, before the pressure becomes formidable and Greenwood Middle succumbs to some fate other than serving its population in an equitable fashion. Talks of expanding Greenwood to serve high school aged students have been happening intermittently for over five years. Together with the elementary school that did not convert, Greenwood and its high school could potentially serve the students of Buckland throughout their mandated public education. A public K–12 system in Buckland could offer further power to resist takeover. However, through a settler colonialism lens, all schools are systemically intertwined with choice and accountability.

As an agent of the interventionist state, Greenwood stands as a safety valve for the Buckland charter district. Olssen (1996) describes the importance of the state in creating and cultivating the necessary institutions for the market to flourish (i.e., neoliberalism). In this case, without Greenwood serving the “undesirables” of Buckland, Yorke Academy would not thrive. While images of a symbiotic relationship between the two institutions might come to mind, Greenwood is not an equal beneficiary. This type of symbiotic relationship is parasitism. Although the public school district grants charters to charter schools and seems to have the upper hand through a lens of authority, from a neoliberal standpoint, the public district serves as a mechanism to further the elite status and success of charter schools.

Closing

Charter schools and choice are ingrained in the psyche of the United States. Even small communities like Buckland have multiple educational options to offer parents and students. Schools are judged based on their clientele’s ability to score well on standardized tests. When students cannot perform well, parents blame teachers and teachers blame parents, essentially missing the point as to the structural magnitude of choice and accountability. The dehumanizing effects of standardization and competition have turned students into data. These living beings are literally discussed as numbers in educational circles where ones and twos are unequal to fours and fives. Similarly, like other capitalist principles, competition in an unregulated educational marketplace is rooted in our colonial history. I am hopeful that viewing choice and accountability through a settler colonialism lens and privileging people’s stories will present a fresh perspective on the issue and assist in bringing the current system of education in the United States closer to a socially just one.

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