

Parents' Reasons for Choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for
Low Socioeconomic Students in Alabama: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Parents' Reasons for Choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for
Low Socioeconomic Students in Alabama: A Mixed-Methods Study

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The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine parents' reasons for choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for low socioeconomic students in Alabama. Low socioeconomic students were defined as students who qualified for free/reduced lunches. The research was designed as a mixed methods study with data being collected via an online survey and interviews. This study fills a gap in the literature about parents' reasons for choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for low socioeconomic students in Alabama.

Based on the literature there are many possible reasons for parents choosing to send their children to private schools. The literature indicated that parents send their children primarily to avoid the lack of strict discipline, lack of parent-approved values, sex education, and certain aspects of curriculum and instruction in the public schools (Crawford & Freeman, 1996).

Based on the results from the survey and interviews, parents chose these schools because they offered more discipline than public schools, they offered better teacher-student ratios, and they also offered Christian based curriculum.

Parents overall had very high expectations for their children. They also wanted a more Christian-based environment for their children. There was limited significance between the two schools studied even though School B only had ten representatives.

PREVIEW

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“I can do all things through Christ which strengthen me.” Philippians 4:13

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013a, 2013b), in fall 2013 private schools in the US were serving 5.1 million students at the elementary and secondary levels. In 2011-12 private schools enrolled about 10% of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a). According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics:

There were differences in private elementary and secondary school attendance by school type within racial/ethnic groups. For all racial/ethnic groups other than Black, higher percentages of private school students attended Catholic schools than other religious schools or nonsectarian schools in 2011–12. For example, 60 percent of Hispanic private school students attended Catholic schools, while 24 percent attended other religious schools and 15 percent attended nonsectarian schools. In contrast, there was a higher percentage of Black private school students attending other religious schools (42 percent) than attending Catholic schools (35 percent). The percentage of Black private school students attending Catholic schools was also higher than the percentage attending nonsectarian schools (23 percent). (U.S. Department of Education, 2013b)

Supporters believe that private schools perform a lot better than public schools in terms of academics (Shanker, 1993; Tooley, 2005). Opponents believe that private schools are not responsible for the academic performance, but instead the demographics of the student population yield the successful performance as they enroll mostly advantaged students who obviously do better academically than disadvantaged students who mostly attend public schools (Lubienski, Lubienski, & Crane, 2008).

Some private schools offer scholarships to assist low-income students and in other cases parents pay tuition based on their income (Tooley, 2005). However, of the 8.5

million families with children in grades K-12 with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more (the highest income bracket measured), 85% have children only in public schools and 12% have children only in private schools (United States Census Bureau, 2009). So it seems that most of the students attending public schools have more family wealth.

Nationally, the number of students who receive free and reduced lunch in schools is 19,700,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, School Nutrition Association, 2013). Over the past 50 years, the achievement gap between high income and low-income students has grown by about 40% and is now nearly twice as large as the black-white achievement gap (Reardon, 2011). Statistics show that dropout rates and math failure rates are also highest among minority students (Wadlington & Wadlington, 2008) with some having learning disabilities and needing special attention.

Another area that could affect academic performances is the cultural barrier. With public schools becoming more diversified, teachers are having a difficult time relating to students from different cultures. In 2011, 84% of the teachers in the United States (US) were white and the number of minority students was quickly rising (Feistritzer, 2011, p. 15). However, the awareness of cultural differences in the classroom must increase in order for teachers to have positive and effective relationships with their students and parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine parents' reasons for choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for low socioeconomic students in Alabama. Low socioeconomic students were defined as students who qualify

for free and reduced lunches. The research was designed as a mixed methods study with data being collected via an online survey and interviews. This study fills a gap in the literature about the parents' reasons for choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for low socioeconomic students.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this mixed-methods study, there was a central research question and four sub-questions. They were as follows:

Central research question. What are parents' reasons for choosing Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools for low socioeconomic students in Alabama?

Four sub-Questions.

1. What are parents' expectations for their child's academic development?
2. What are parents' expectations for their child's spiritual development?
3. What are parents' expectations for their child's social development?
4. What are parents' invested expectations for their child's academic, spiritual, and social development?

Background

Private schools. Private schools attract high-ability, low-income students by offering them tuition discounts and sometimes fellowships (Epple & Romano, 1998). According to a research study by Williby and Hill (2010), Catholic schools that have a high percentage of low socioeconomic students, and experience average and above average achievement in eighth-grade test results, have students with positive high school experiences and values, and their parents are committed to ensuring continued and

consistent student participation and enrollment. The effects of these traits can be seen by consistency in paying tuition, and the obvious effort students put into their studies and attending school.

Non-public schools of Alabama. There were 1,629 schools in the state of Alabama at the time the study was conducted. Of those 1,629 schools, almost 400 of them were non-public. Of the almost 400 non-public schools, 344 had elementary grades. Of the 344 non-public elementary schools; 70 were non-denominational, 37 were Catholic, 6 were Lutheran, 9 were Seventh Day Adventist, 1 was Jewish, 17 were Presbyterian, 10 were Assembly of God, 74 were Baptist, 5 were Church of God, 9 were Pentecostal, 10 were Church of Christ, 7 were Episcopal, 5 were Islamic, 10 were Methodist, 1 was Church of Nazarene, 1 was Church of God in Christ, and 72 were non-religious. (Alabama Department of Education, 2010-2011).

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terminology is defined.

Non-public non-denominational schools—These are private Christian schools with no affiliation with any denominational religious organizations.

Low socioeconomic students—Students who would qualify for free/reduced lunch while attending a private school.

Parents—Any parents 19 years or older.

Private parochial school—A non-public religion based school in Alabama.

Elementary schools—Schools with any grades between kindergarten through 8th grade.



Source: Alabama Department of Education: Statistics and Facts about Alabama Schools (2010-2011)

Figure 1. Types of non-public elementary schools in Alabama.

Schools with a high percentage of low socioeconomic students—Schools with 90% or more of their student body made up of students of color

Assumptions

As a researcher, my assumption was that the parents of children in non-public non-denominational elementary schools would be honest in responding to the survey and participating in interviews about their expectations for low socioeconomic students.

Limitations

Limitations were imposed by the researcher to note potential weaknesses in the study (Creswell, 2003). The limitations for this study was:

1. One of the limitations was convenience sampling as two schools in the study were within minutes of each other.
2. Another limitation was that there were only 10 participants that volunteered from School B and only 27 participants who volunteered from School A.
3. Another limitation was that only 3 parents volunteered for the interview.

Delimitations

Delimitations were imposed by the researcher as boundaries and/or restrictions that helped to narrow the scope of the study (Creswell, 2003). The delimitations for this study were:

1. The researcher only examined 2 of the 70 non-public non-denominational elementary schools in the state of Alabama, serving a population of low socioeconomic students.
2. The researcher only examined 2 of the 5 non-public non-denominational elementary schools in the state of Alabama, serving a high population of low socioeconomic students.

Target Audience

The target audience for this study were parents in two non-public non-denominational elementary schools in Alabama.

Significance

Research has shown that strong parent-teacher relationships and strong teacher-student relationships help to foster an atmosphere for increased student learning and achievement (Klem & Connell, 2009). This study is significant due to a gap in the

literature regarding parents' reasons for choosing non-public non-denominational elementary schools for low socioeconomic students. The results from this study may help administrators and teachers in non-public non-denominational elementary schools, make more effective connections with their low socioeconomic students and parents, and help them become more effective in increasing learning for low socioeconomic students' academic, spiritual, and social development. Administrators may also find information about parents' invested expectations helpful in establishing family budget plans that help reduce the financial burdens parents encounter.

Summary

One of 10 students in the U.S. attends a private school (U.S. Department of Education, 2013a). The majority of students that attend private school attend Catholic schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2013b). However, in the state of Alabama, only about 10% of students attend Catholic elementary schools, but 1 in 5 students attend non-denominational elementary schools (Alabama Department of Education, 2010-2011).

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Over 34 million children are currently enrolled in elementary and junior high schools in the United States. Of these about 15% are attending non-public religious schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The two largest church bodies supporting such schools are the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982). Substantial attention has been given to the effects of Catholic primary and secondary schooling on student achievement. Catholic schools have a positive effect on verbal and mathematics achievement growth (Coleman et al., 1982; Evans & Schwab, 1995; Figlio & Stone, 2000; Greeley, 1982; Ludwig, 1997; Murnane, 1984; Neal, 1997; Rouse, 1998; Sandler, 1996, 1997; Sandler & Krautmann, 1995).

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine parents' reasons for choosing non-public non-denominational elementary schools for low socioeconomic students in Alabama. Parents' expectations for their children were examined in four areas: academic development, spiritual development, social development, and invested expectations required in each of these areas.

This literature review contained the following components: Attributes of Low Socioeconomic Students; History of Christian Education in Light of the Evolution of Public Schools (across the United States and internationally); History of the Teachers Role and Expectations in Private Schools, Reasons for Parents Selecting Parochial

Schools for their child; and Parent-Teacher Relationships and Student Achievement in Parochial Schools.

Attributes of Low Socioeconomic Students

According to the American Psychological Association (2014), the following was stated about Education and Socioeconomic Status (SES):

Research indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills more slowly compared to children from higher SES groups (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). Initial academic skills are correlated with the home environment, where low literacy environments and chronic stress negatively affect a child's pre-academic skills. The school systems in low-SES communities are often under resourced, negatively affecting students' academic progress (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Inadequate education and increased dropout rates affect children's academic achievement, perpetuating the low-SES status of the community. . . . Children's initial reading competence is correlated with the home literacy environment, number of books owned, and parent distress (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). . . . In a nationwide study of American kindergarten children, 36% of parents in the lowest-income quintile read to their children on a daily basis, compared with 62% of parents from the highest-income quintile (Coley, 2002).

Low socioeconomic students were defined as students who qualify for free and reduced lunches. This study filled a gap in the literature about parents' expectations for low socioeconomic students in Non-Public Non-Denominational Elementary Schools.

Historical research suggested that students in Catholic schools had higher levels of educational attainment than students in public schools (Perlmann, 1989). However, research done by Sandler in 2000 suggested that even though there is a positive correlation between parochial school attendance and high school graduation rates; it is a result of positive selection rather than superior parochial schooling. According to a study by Boehm (1962), Catholic parochial working-class students of average intelligence scored higher than academically gifted students in public schools, and Catholic parochial