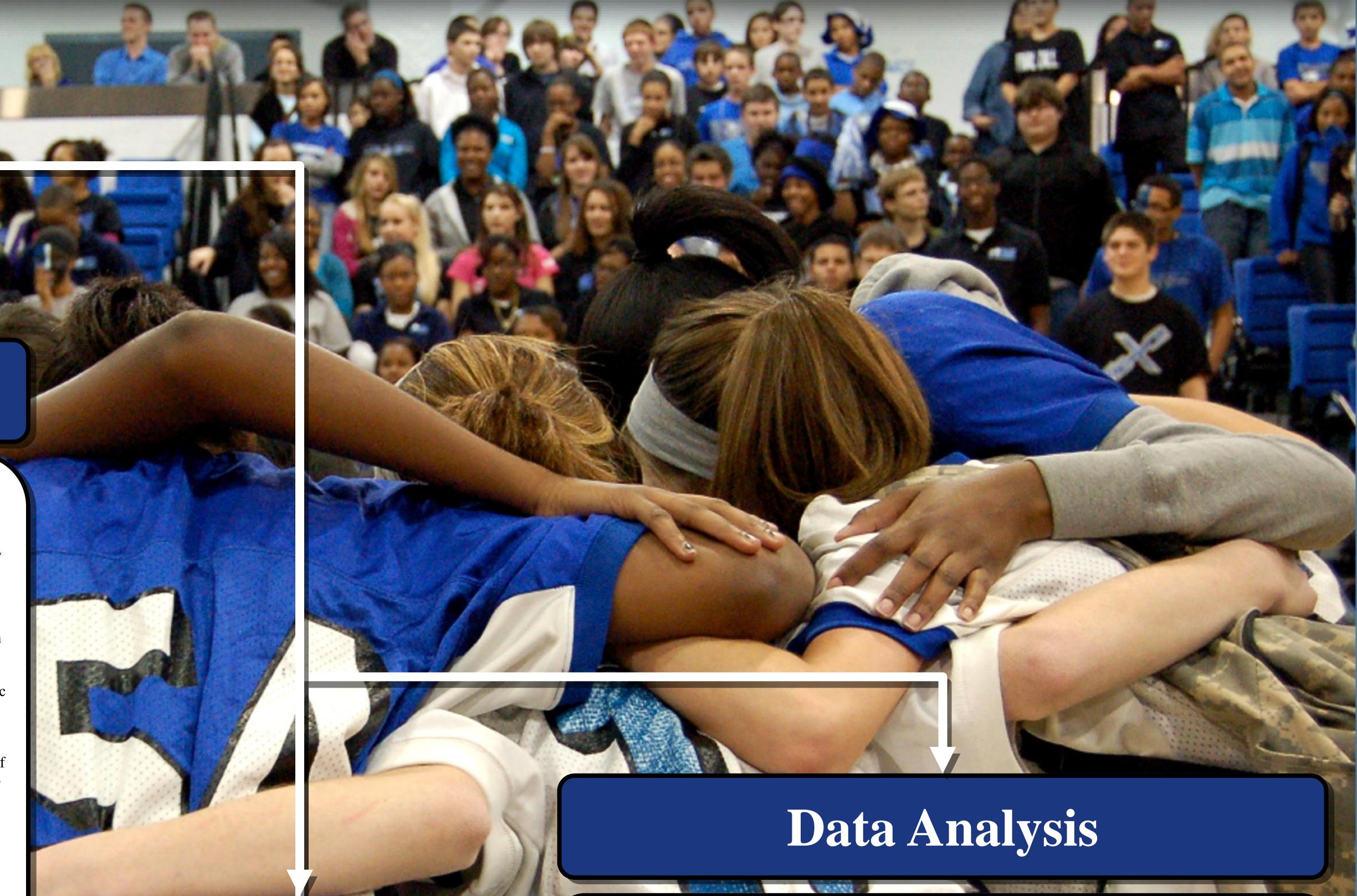# Religious Education and Racial Diversity

An Empirical Case Study of Student Religiosity in the Context of Urban School Choice

Research Question

Tuition Vouchers create the possibility of racially and socio-economically diverse religious schools. **In such diversity, does religion serve as a unifying factor?** If so, can religious private schools alleviate the problem of "segregation by zip code", when Tuition Vouchers are available?

Review of Literature

Public Schools and Unintentional Segregation

"one of the greatest sources of unequal educational opportunity, and of limited opportunities for autonomy, is the de facto segregation of residential neighborhoods by race and class"
(Brighouse 2003, 203)

Erica Frankenberg and Chungmei Lee (2002) argued that since the 1980s, when segregation in public schools hit an all time low, **public schools have been "rapidly re-segregating"**. Because public schools were the institutions intended to create common opportunity, the fact that they are re-segregating since the Civil Rights movement, raises serious concerns for minorities. Because "segregation by race" is strongly linked to "segregation by poverty" public school districts become naturally segregated by "zip code" (Frankenberg and Lee 2002, 3). Charles Nemeth (2011) calls this phenomenon, "**geographic tyranny**" (1).

As of 2008, there are more than 1,700 "drop-out factories" in the United States: schools where less than 60% of their students graduate. These schools are overwhelmingly Black and Latino. Such schools are "monopolized enterprises maintained at the expense of freedom of choice" and may simply lead to a "permanent underclass of under-educated, unemployable Americans" (Nemeth 2011; Bernard 2011).

Students in the 21st century are experiencing "substantially lower levels of inter-racial exposure" (Frankenberg and Lee 2002, 5). Gary Orfield (2001) confirmed this trend, noting that most children in the 21st century will experience "separate societies and schools" (2). White students are increasingly less exposed to black and Latino students; as Frankenberg and Lee (2002) note, "this isolation is highly correlated with poverty, which is often strongly related to striking inequalities in test scores, graduation rates, courses offered and college-going rates" (22). Unintentional segregation of public schools promotes inequality and injustice.

Frankberg and Lee (2003) found that public charter schools, which are intended to create school choice, have also become "intensely segregated" (36). Because public charter schools were no more de-segregated than their public school counterparts, they may not be a solution for creating a multi-racial school environment.

Can private schools, by means of state-funded tuition vouchers, create a multi-racial school environment?

School Choice and Intentional Integration

"School choice is the Civil Rights issue of the 21st Century"
(Bernard 2011; Nemeth 2011; Jones and Hollenbeck 2011)

When students are trapped in failing schools, "the misery heightens for those lacking economic resources to choose an alternative" (Nemeth 2011, 1).

Tuition Voucher programs serve as an essential link between "the choice of where to live and where to send your child to school and so removes the segregating effects of 'selection by mortgage,'" (Harrison 2005, 185).

In the past fifty years, private school enrollment has been on the decline, but in some parts of the country, white **students in private schools are enrolled with higher proportions of minority students** than in their public school counterparts (Reardon and Yun 2002).

Students who participated in voucher programs were found **less likely to attend segregated schools** than students who remained in public schools (Harrison 2005, 204).

School choice "promotes inclusion, integration and tolerance" (Bernard 2011).

Student Religiosity and Race

In a 10-year longitudinal study, Perkins (1992) found that strong **student religiosity was linked to a "reduction in prejudice"** (353). Religion has the evocative power to unify students as human beings created in the image of God, while, at the same time, helping them to understand and appreciate their differences.

Parades-Collins and Collins (2011) demonstrated that **religious commitment and an "ethic of caring" about race** interact with one another. Religiosity can inspire racial understanding and appreciation for diversity.

Religious private schools that embrace a **multi-racial mission** provide "a context of security, mutual sharing [where] learning can occur" (Hearn 2009, 287).

Geoffrey Short (2002) argued that religious private schools do not "undermine social cohesion" and can serve as a **"force of unity"** to "promote a tolerant society"** (559). Religiosity can promote tolerance and unity.

If parents value the **enriching aspects of racially diverse education**, they will "deliberately choose schools that offer a diverse student body and the opportunity for their children to mix with different types of students" (Harrison 2005, 205). In the context of school choice, religion can be a foundation for creating racially diverse schools.

When religious private schools value racial diversity, they will intentionally work to create a school environment that fosters such values.

Methodology

Population and Sample

. **Population:** 475 students from an urban, PreK-12 religious private school; **Sample Size:** N = 128.

. Students representing 120 different churches
. One of the four largest state-wide participants in the Ohio EdChoice scholarship program
. 275 students whose parents utilized tuition vouchers (58%); 200 students whose parents paid tuition (42%)
. 200 African American (42%), 202 white (43%), 34 Hispanic (7%), 40 Multicultural (8%), and one student was American Indian (< 1%).
. 269 students (57%) participated in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch program

Instrumentation

DUREL (Duke University Religion Index) instrument was used to assess student religiosity; a well-validated 5-item scale to measure three aspects of religiosity

Research Design

Multi-Group Comparison
Survey results were grouped by race; Statistical comparison of DUREL religiosity scores between the groups. **Do students' religiosity scores significantly differ by race?**

Limitations

Case Study: Small sample size, limited geographic location, potential selection bias, particular mission of the school and its effect on students sampled

Data Analysis

Summary Data

Racial Groups: White/Caucasian (N = 51), Black/African America (N = 56), Latino/Hispanic (N = 12), Multiracial (N = 6), Other (N = 2)

Test for Significant Difference

A non-parametric Tukey multiple comparisons test was applied to test for statistically significant difference in student religiosity across the racial groups.
The average values of student religiosity across categories of Race were not found to be statistically different: $p = 0.3$.

Discussion

Implications

Religious private schools can provide an environment where racial and cultural differences can be celebrated in the context of underlined shared faith. Differences are not discarded in the name of unity, but instead, acknowledged, confronted, and reconciled.

In terms of public policy, "social justice cannot legitimately be a basis for defending the status quo against the introduction of choice measures, unless there is good evidence that those measures will make things worse" (Brighouse 209). As Nemeth (2011) noted, school choice measures can surely "do no worse" and can possibly **liberate the constituents of failing schools** (2). Religious private schools that are intentional about racial diversity can play a part in that liberation — and create a religiously grounded, multi-racial educational environment.

Religion can serve as a unifying factor among racial groups. However, Mark Hearn (2009) warns against quick discussions of "unity" at the expense of "**really seeing persons, their people groups, and their unique differences**" (281).

Hearn is concerned about "color-blind racism" whereby schools might "simply swallows persons of color up in a white melting pot by neutralizing color and acting as if it does not exist" (2009, 283). That is not the case for urban, religious private schools with an equal number of black and white students, or even a majority of black and Hispanic students. In such cases, as in the school in this study, the **multi-racial school community** is truly that; the majority race of the broader culture and the minority races are at once unified with and **mutually transformed** by one another.

As religious private schools **recognize and embrace racial diversity**, they create an environment where racially diverse students and families can "speak to and shape their identities as children of a colorful God"; moreover, "their wounds and experiences of racism have holy ground on which to walk and to be healed" (Hearn 2009, 286).

Future Research

In spite of the potential for religious private schools to create multi-racial environments by means of Tuition Vouchers, it will likely remain difficult to gain "political support for social justice in education, whether or not it is attached to school choice" (Brighouse 2003, 209).

Future research must focus on **expanding the population** to a larger number of schools beyond a case study, to identify trends of **religiously grounded racial diversity in private schools** across the nation. School choice may in fact be part of the solution to addressing **the civil rights issue of the 21st century**.