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CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANT PARENTS AND
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHOICE IN NEW YORK CITY

by

KESHIA JAMES

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Caribbean Immigrant Parents and Elementary School Choice in New York
City

by

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For the over 3 million immigrants of New York City, the education system is one of the many areas they must navigate in their transition to the United States (MOIA annual Report, 2018). However, for the Caribbean immigrant navigating the school system is especially hard. Of the five boroughs in New York City, Brooklyn has the second-largest immigrant population with approximately 28% of the immigrants in the borough from the Caribbean. The 2018 United States Census shows that Caribbean immigrants account for about 258000 of the approximately 900000 immigrants in Brooklyn. The racial and cultural diversity among Caribbean immigrants is ultimately reflected in New York City schools. Coming from countries with smaller education systems and limited options in terms of the type of school children can attend, Caribbean immigrants with young children must consider many factors when choosing schools at the elementary level.

This study investigates how Caribbean parents navigate New York City's school choice systems: What do they care about when choosing elementary schools? What factors influence their choices? I conducted a qualitative study by using semi-structured interviews with nine

Caribbean immigrant parents living in East Flatbush Brooklyn to better understand how Caribbean parents make their school choices. I found that cultural background as it relates to schooling and parents' school experiences had a significant influence on what parents want in a school for their children and ultimately the type of school they choose. The study draws on an analysis of interviews using a cultural-ecological typology and socioeconomic theories of school choice.

This study provides critical information on how the education system can be more culturally responsive to immigrants of color, acknowledging that the expectations of Caribbean immigrant parents or caregivers may be different from other immigrant parents.

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Introduction

Regardless of cultural background, race, or socio-economic status, every parent wants what is best for their child. Accessing quality, or what one may consider desirable education, is foremost in every parent's mind. Giving parents many options at the early stages of their children's educational journey provides them an opportunity to control their children's education. This form of school choice goes back prior to the industrial revolution when religious-based schools were prominent. Parents had the option to choose the school that reflected their religious beliefs (Brownson, 1870). Having several types of schools to choose from puts the power in the hands of the parents. However, providing parents with options is to assume that we know what all parents want.

In New York City, parents have many options to consider when choosing schools for their children, and this can be overwhelming to navigate. It can be especially overwhelming and complicated for the city's immigrant population, who may come from countries with different school systems and limited options. As an immigrant, one must first figure out what level or grade their child will fit in, what the enrollment process entails, what types of schools are there, and what is the difference between the schools. Aside from these concerns, parents must also figure out which schools will give their children the best education, however, they define that. Research on how immigrant parents choose often focuses on Hispanic and Asian immigrants (Golann, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj, 2016; Taylor Haynes, Phillips & Goldring, 2010). However, in New York City there is a large Caribbean immigrant population that has a rich history in the city's economic, political, and educational development. The borough of Brooklyn has the second-largest immigrant population in New York City with over 900,000 foreign-born residents. According to the 2018 US Census, twenty-eight percent of Brooklyn's immigrant population is from the Caribbean. As a

Caribbean immigrant living in Brooklyn, I am often in conversation with friends and family members about their school options and the schools they believe to be the best for their children's educational development. This study puts the East Flatbush community of Brooklyn under the microscope to find out what Caribbean immigrant parents look for when choosing elementary schools for their children.

Background

The Caribbean Community in East Flatbush

The growing presence of Caribbean communities in New York City began in the 1960s. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, ended the national-origins quota system that admitted immigrants based on race and ethnicity and replaced it with a system based on family reunification and attracting skilled labor (Chishti, Chishti, Hipsman, & Ball, 2017). Political instability in the region also contributed to the higher emigration of professionals from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Brooklyn became one of the boroughs that West Indian immigrants gravitated towards. Within Brooklyn, East Flatbush was considered one of the most West Indian neighborhoods in New York City (Henke, 2001). This is still true today as the demographics of the community have seen little change since. East Flatbush is a residential neighborhood bounded by Crown Heights in the north, Canarsie and Flatlands to the south, Brownsville to the east, and Flatbush to the west. The community has a Caribbean immigrant population that holds on to the culture and value systems of their Caribbean origins. East Flatbush is also central to New York City's annual West Indian Labor Day celebration and several diaspora groups and organizations.

As a Caribbean immigrant myself, there is an immense sense of familiarity about East Flatbush. For many of my close family and friends living in East Flatbush, cultural familiarity is one of the main reasons many immigrants from the Caribbean choose to settle in the area and may

be reluctant to leave for other neighborhoods. I observe this cultural familiarity in the food served at the restaurants in the neighborhood, the music, and the array of dialects you will hear as you encounter East Flatbush residents in its streets. Caribbean immigrants take immense pride in their cultural background. They migrate for better opportunities for themselves, and their families yet keep close ties with their country of origin. Like other immigrants coming from developing countries, Caribbean immigrants believe that educational achievement is a way to advance their families in a new country as well as their family in their home country.

Education in the Caribbean

Formal schooling in the Caribbean begins when the child is 3 years old at the preschool level which is mostly privately run. Though schooling is not compulsory at that age, there is a high enrollment. In a study conducted on ten Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries, there is 55% to 95% enrollment of children ages 3 to 5 in preschool programs across the region (Charles & Williams, 2006). Compulsory education begins at the age of five at the primary/ elementary school level. At the primary level, there are only two school options; government funded public schools or private schools. According to the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Education Statistical Digest, about 96% of students at the primary school level are enrolled in public schools (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, 2019). The public option is the most common since it is of no cost to parents. The popularity of public schools is evident on the individual islands as well. For example, in Barbados, there are 68 government run primary schools and 27 private schools on the island (Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training, 2022). Of the 79 primary schools in Grenada, 23 are privately run (Grenada Ministry of Education, 2017). However, private schools are still required to follow the country's education guidelines and curriculum as students are expected to sit the same exams as public schools at the end of the primary and secondary levels.

Children spend seven years in primary school then enter secondary school after the sixth grade. In most situations, choosing a private or public school depends on whether the parent is financially able to cover the tuition. For the public-school option, parents would often choose the neighborhood school or a school that is close to their workplace.

In English-speaking Caribbean countries, the education system is impacted by the islands' colonial past and the British education system (Peters, 2001). For example, most of the English-speaking Caribbean islands follow the British system with many of the schools historically being religious based (Coates, 2012). Many of these religious-based schools, however, are publicly funded with management boards run by the church.

Because of the islands' colonial past, teacher-student relationship in schools reflects the oppressive plantation life of the islands' colonial past (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018; Birbal & Hewitt-Bradshaw, 2019). Schooling in the Caribbean is also very structured with strict rules that students are expected to follow. Discipline is strongly emphasized and plays a major part in students' daily learning (Kutnick, Jules & Layne, 1997). Throughout the region, both primary and secondary school students are expected to wear uniforms and follow strict rules on how they should be worn. However, at the turn of the 21st Century, the islands have been making strides in taking a more regional approach towards education in terms of curriculum and examinations. At the elementary level especially, there are curriculum developments that reflect the cultural traditions of the region and incorporate more contemporary styles and strategies in teaching and learning (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018).

Education in New York City

Caribbean immigrants traditionally leave their home country for economic reasons and like many immigrants, they view getting an education as the steppingstone to guarantee acquisition of the American dream. New York City is divided into 32 school districts which covers the city's

five boroughs. School zones are smaller areas within districts that may be made up of only a few blocks in a neighborhood. The zone that you live in influences the school options available for elementary students. Parents can choose elementary schools within or outside their zone to best meet their needs. The traditional public schools offer free school to New York City residents and are the most common option for parents. These schools are run by school districts under the direction of New York City's Department of Education. Some districts may have open enrollment, which gives parents the option to send their children to a school outside of their zone. However, there is a growing presence of charter schools that are also publicly funded but not under the directives of the public school system. This independence gives charter schools more freedom in the way they structure their programs. Magnet schools are another public-school option that offers specialized learning based on students' interests that parents can also consider. There is also the private or independent option that is often operated by religious organizations and requires tuition.

The East Flatbush neighborhood consists of eighteen elementary and early education schools from school districts 17, 18, and 22. Ten of the schools are New York City Early Education Centers (NYCEEC) which are independent schools that partner with the Department of Education to provide early childhood education. Many of these centers are run and staffed by Caribbean immigrants. Six of the schools in the neighborhood are traditional K-5 and K-8 schools, and two are kindergarten to second grade charter schools.

Coming from school systems that emphasize discipline and very structured learning, Caribbean immigrants may tend to gravitate towards certain school options because of the discipline and structure they are perceived to offer their students. The following literature review looks at two theories on how and why parents choose schools: socio-economic status theory and

cultural-ecological theory. These theories integrate the social and economic advancements that Caribbean immigrants seek and the cultural background that may influence their school choices.

Literature Review

Socio-economic status and school choice

Research on parents' school choice has shown that there are several factors to consider when it comes to choosing a school. Schneider, Mark, Marshall, Teske, and Roch (1998a) in a survey of 400 residents in four school districts of the New York metropolitan area found that the racial and socioeconomic background of parents significantly impacts what school characteristics they find important and the choices they eventually make. Parents' racial and socio-economic background also determines the availability and accuracy of information on school conditions that parents can use to make their decisions. Schneider and Buckley (2002), in a study of parents' search behavior on a website for public schools in Washington DC, found that parents' educational level also influenced their choice of school. Parents with a college education showed more interest in the academics and the demographics of the student population when choosing a school, whereas less-educated parents value discipline as well as academics (Schneider et al. 1998a).

However, what parents want in a school can be vastly different from what they choose because of constraints related to their socio-economic status. Bell (2009), in a study on parents' school choice in one Midwestern city, suggests that while "School choice theory rests on the idea that the set of schools from which parents select— their choice sets—must have at least some good schools" (p. 192), this assumption may be false. Bell's study showed that both low-income and high-income parents wanted the same school characteristics in terms of academically high-performing schools, but the choice sets available to the two groups of parents were different.

Parents' socio-economic status impacts where they live and in turn what schools they have available to choose from. Parents' income also influences their "social -capital" which Bell finds

determines the quality of information they may have access to depending on their social connections. Therefore, low-income parents tend to select failing schools while high-income parents tend to choose selective and high-performing schools. Low-income parents choose the way they do not because they want to but because they do not have schools of varying quality that are accessible to them.

While studies that explore parents' school as a function of their socio-economic status are useful, they do not address how culture may influence parents' school choice within the categories of race and socioeconomic background. We can extend differences among parents to their social and cultural backgrounds as this influences the value placed on education and how they define school quality. Parents have different values and would choose schools to reflect such viewpoints.

Cultural-ecological Theory

Cultural ecological theory considers the way culture influences how people adapt to different environments. The theory is also used in scholarship on the way culture interplays with society to influence educational achievement among minority groups (Friend, Hunter, Fletcher, 2011; Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi & Johnson, 1990) These studies draw on earlier research by anthropologist John Ogbu. Ogbu's research on minorities' experience in schools in the United States places minorities in two distinct groups; voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary minorities are immigrants who have moved to the United States for better opportunities, whereas involuntary minorities are nonimmigrants who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved such as Black Americans and Native Americans (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

The grouping of minorities as voluntary and involuntary is a part of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory, which considers the dynamics of the minority community as well as social and school factors. One part of the theory addresses minorities' treatment in education and another part looks at how minorities perceive and respond to schooling because of that treatment. The theory

uses the treatment of minorities by white Americans to explain why they have certain perceptions of schooling.

According to Ogbu, immigrants view American education as an opportunity that they would not have in their home country to be successful. Ogbu argues that voluntary minorities, which include Caribbean immigrants, "do not interpret their presence in the United States as forced upon them by the U.S. government or by white Americans" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Voluntary minorities did not have the same history of social and institutional racism and may have different perceptions of the various school options. This view towards education is not limited to first-generation immigrants as Ogbu's research found that education of the following generations "continues to be influenced by the community forces of their forebears" (p. 166). To counter Ogbu's finding, Gibson (1997), argues that beliefs on education are short-lived among immigrant groups as second-generation immigrants are at risk of marginalization and school failure because of the change in the way they perceive education.

Gibson (1997) also believes that there are greater chances of academic success when immigrant parents are more in tune with the culture of the new community while holding ties to their cultural traditions and ethnic community. I found that the view towards education continues from generation to generation among the Caribbean immigrant parents I interviewed. That drive to get a good education and social advancement that voluntary minorities possess as Ogbu claims may as well be because of the general culture and perceptions toward education that immigrants experience in their home country. The immigrant parents in East Flatbush can pass on their beliefs because the culture is well maintained in the community.

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory and Schneider and Bell's socio-economic theory identify the racial and socioeconomic implications of parents' school choice. However, the theories lack insight into variations within both voluntary and involuntary groups, which is a major criticism of

the theory (Foley, 2004). In this study, I use cultural ecological theory to show how Caribbean immigrant parents' school choice and views of education are influenced by their culture supported by the community in which they live.

Different perspectives on culture

In a study on the role of culture in school choice, Bulman (2004), argues that cultural differences within minority groups are a significant indicator of why parents choose the way they do. Bulman's study shows that there is no singular perception or mindset among minorities when it comes to school choice. Minority groups consist of varying races with diverse cultural backgrounds and social experiences. Bulman states that "Culture should not be seen merely as an additional variable to help explain the limited school choices of poor and minority families. Rather, culture should be seen as the fabric out of which all families make sense of education" (p. 493).

Bulman's research reflects Ann Swidler's view of culture as a "tool kit." He suggests that parents' choice of school for their children relies not on culture in the way of religion, social class, gender, or ethnicity but rather "the tools of their past educational experiences" (p. 493). The "tool kit" image of culture suggests that people use stories, rituals, or worldviews to solve problems that may arise (Swidler, 1986). Bulman argues that some parents may view all schools the same because of their experience, however, other parents' cultural backgrounds may perceive some schools to be better than others for their child's educational journey.

Another perspective on the role of culture in parents' school choice looks at the style of parenting. The parenting style of most Caribbean parents is considered strict and demanding, requiring respect, manners, and obedience from the child (Wilson, Wilson, & Berkeley-Caines, 2003). These expectations often spill over to the parent's expectations of the child's schooling as they expect the school to perpetuate the same values of discipline. Academic success is highly valued in the Caribbean as education is a vehicle for upward mobility and improved life. Having

the desire for a better way of life for their children and families, Caribbean parents tend to emphasize that children focus on academics to produce good grades as another marker of success (Nehaul, 1999). First-generation Caribbean parents who migrated to New York City consider their views on discipline and academic success when choosing the right school for their children and may even be of more importance than other influencers of school choice. However, Golann, Debs & Weiss (2019) argue that minority parents have varying views on discipline, but studies tend to view it from narrow perspectives of following rules. In their examination of what discipline means to Black and Latinx parents, Golann et.al theorize discipline as including behavioral discipline, self-discipline, and academic discipline. The misconception that minority parents view discipline solely on the concept of punishment and abiding by rules creates a gap in what parents want and what is offered and influences what school parents choose.

In this study, I found that culture played a significant role in how Caribbean immigrant parents choose schools. Culture shaped their experiences and what they view as valuable when it comes to education. The cultural connection also influences immigrant parents' reliance on family and friends to learn about their unfamiliar environment. Studies also found that family members and social networks influence parents' perceptions of education and schools (Holme, 2002; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Liang 2015; Pattillo, 1999; Weininger, 2014). However, Fong (2018) in the study of social networks' influence on school choice among parents found that how parents' access and use information varies according to social and racial background. In my study, reliance on social networks for school choice was more so based on cultural similarity or understanding. I found that Caribbean immigrant parents rely considerably on the recommendations of other immigrant parents in their community when choosing a school.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Caribbean parents navigate New York City's school choice systems: What do Caribbean immigrant parents care about when they choose

elementary schools? What factors influence their choices? Understanding the Caribbean immigrant's decision-making process for choosing schools will contribute to the fields of Education and Urban Studies.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative research method. I conducted one-on-one interviews with Caribbean immigrant parents and caregivers of young children to learn how they made their school choices. I took a comparative and descriptive approach to assess how Caribbean immigrant parents in New York City choose elementary schools for their children. A comparative approach allowed me to identify how the decision-making process varies among parents living in the US for varying lengths of time. Comparative research goes beyond single cases and explores the similarities and differences between groups, events, or issues at different points in time (Boutelle, Feldman, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012). According to Esser and Vliegthart (2017), comparative analysis allows for the testing of theories across different settings and prevents over-generalizing based on individual perceptions.

Participants and Recruitment

I recruited nine adults between the ages of 18 and 55 to participate in this study. Each participant was either a parent or caregiver of at least one child who attended kindergarten in Brooklyn or will in the upcoming school year. The parents were all residents of East Flatbush and either a recent or established immigrant from a Caribbean country. For the study, I defined recent immigrants as people who have immigrated to the US within the past ten years. I defined established immigrants as people living in the United States for over 10 years. The categories of recent and established immigrants allowed me to examine the impact of coming from different periods of education in the Caribbean and the length of time parents have been living in New York City have on their decision-making when choosing elementary schools. By categorizing the parents

by the length of time living in New York City, I was able to note the impact that familiarity had on the parents' ability to navigate the education system.

As a Caribbean immigrant myself with family ties in the East Flatbush, I recruited participants through acquaintances in the community. I also used broadcast emails to recruit participants through community groups and organizations as well as daycare centers in the area. The emails of the groups and daycare centers were publicly available on social media and other public advertisements such as flyers or signs around the community.

Once I confirmed eligibility, I scheduled and conducted one-on-one interviews via telephone or video call with each parent or caregiver and audio recorded with their consent. The interviews started with demographic questions to gather information on the participants' sex, age, country of origin, educational attainment, and length of stay in the United States. I followed with open-ended, semi-structured questions to elicit detailed information about parents' education experience, what they want in a school, the type of school parents tend to choose for their children, and why. In some cases, I asked follow-up questions to allow the parents to elaborate on their responses as much as possible [see Appendix A for preliminary interview questions].

Participant Demographics

The participants were from five Caribbean countries: Grenada, Guyana, Barbados, Trinidad, and St. Vincent. Table 1 below shows the demographic information gathered on the parents, which includes the number of years they have been living in New York City and the level of schooling here in the US and their home country. The demographic information gives context and serves as categories I analyzed to gather information on the research questions as well as other themes that arose from the interviews. For confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all participants.

Table 1. Study Participants

Parent	Sex	Country of Origin	Education attained in Country of origin	Years in US	Education attained in the US	School Choice
1.Tia	F	Grenada	Early Elementary	28	Associate Degree	Public/Private
2. Michelle	F	Trinidad & Tobago	Middle School	20	Bachelor's Degree	Public
3. Emma	F	Trinidad & Tobago	College	23	Associate Degree	Public
4.Diana	F	St. Vincent	College	17	Bachelor's Degree	Charter
5. Wayne	M	Barbados	High School	10	Bachelor's Degree	Public
6. Kathy	F	Trinidad & Tobago	High School	7	GED	Charter
7.Rhonda	F	Grenada	College	21	Associate Degree	Charter/Public
8. Donna	F	Guyana	Elementary	20	Bachelor's Degree	Charter
9. Peter	M	Grenada	College	11	Bachelor's Degree	Private

Six of the parents were female and two were males. Seven parents have been living in the United States for more than ten years and I considered them established immigrants based on the descriptors used for this study. Six of the parents attended school past the elementary level in their

home countries while two started elementary school in New York City. Eight of the nine parents have some level of post-secondary education that they attained while living in the United States. The 2020 annual report from New York City's Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs found that approximately 36% of New York City's population is foreign-born. Twenty percent of immigrants in New York City hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and approximately 50% are English proficient. My sample is a representation of skilled and educated Caribbean immigrants. All the parents are English proficient and 8 out of the 9 are college educated

Data Analysis

I transcribed the recorded interviews and noted recurring themes among responses for analysis. Identifying recurring themes helped me to identify relationships in the responses and developed an understanding of what Caribbean immigrant parents in East Flatbush look for in elementary schools and what variations existed among them. The themes also gave insight as to what extent the type of school parents choose relates to their cultural background, educational experience, and understanding of the New York school system. In analyzing the responses, I sought to answer these questions: How do Caribbean immigrant parents navigate New York City's school choice systems? What do Caribbean parents care about when they choose elementary schools? What factors influence their choices? What types of schools do they gravitate toward?

Findings and Discussion

The main aim of this research study was to investigate what Caribbean immigrant parents care about when they choose schools for their children and what factors influence their decision making. Based on the responses from the interviews with Caribbean immigrant parents, I identified four aspects of schooling that were particularly important to these parents when choosing elementary schools in New York City:

- Strong academic program

- Location and security
- Discipline, structure, and respect for authority
- Parent-teacher relationship

I found that in many of the responses, there were clear connections between what the parents want in the schools they chose for their children and what their school experience in their home country was like. I found the connections between parent school experience and their desires for their children to be a key indicator of the cultural influence on school choice. The influence, however, was negative or positive depending on individual experiences. In the discussion of my findings, I connect how the characteristics that parents look for in a school and their school choices are influenced by their school experiences and cultural background.

Strong Academic Programs.

In the English-speaking Caribbean, success in schooling is dependent on students' grades and passes in summative exams at the end of the primary (elementary) and secondary (high school) levels. Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent, Barbados, Grenada, and Guyana all have exit exams in the primary and secondary levels, some of which are administered by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2021). From my experience of schooling in the Caribbean, passing these exams is a country-wide affair that highlights students' academic achievement. For example, the exit exam for elementary students in Grenada is so highly regarded by the students' families and community, that the local newspapers will publish the list of the students that pass the exams at the end of the school year. From this list, the public can scrutinize the students' scores, rank, and the type of secondary school they receive placement for. Rhonda alludes to the level of community involvement in students, performance in her response to how heavily focused academics is in her home country Grenada. She mentions that "if you didn't do

well. You were looked down upon. So basically, your parents and your community and the school as a whole.”

The academic program that the school offers was a factor that most of the parents considered in their decision making. When asked what characteristics they look for in an elementary school for their children, eight parents identified the school’s academic program as being important. However, parents consider academics from different perspectives. Donna wanted a school that has good academic performance because she wanted her child “to be challenged to her highest potential.” Tia and Michelle both have two children who started elementary school within the past five years. The two parents want schools with academic programs that would challenge and push their children to excel. Both parents chose schools with a gifted and talented program and believed that the presence of such a program in the school was a sign of competence among the teaching staff. Tia, 35 years old from Grenada, explained:

I did want to make sure that they had a great core of academics. They pride themselves on doing well. If there was a gifted and talented, I wanted a school with a gifted and talented program, because that showed that the teachers are held to that standard.

Michelle, also 35 years old from Trinidad and Tobago appreciates a “stricter academic” program for her children as well. She ensured that her children were on par for these programs even if it meant tutoring them herself:

I made sure that they were able to do well enough to be accepted in the gifted program for this school. Uh, with that they have more accelerated courses in terms of academics, So I try to make sure that they [are] excelling in their group as much as possible.

To Tia and Michelle, having a gifted and talented program meant that there would be some level of accountability in the teaching and learning that takes place in the school, which in turn would lead to the student's likelihood of success. Both parents are established immigrants who also attended school in New York City from elementary to college level. The parents' experience as students in New York City schools may be a reason for their correlation of gifted and talented programs to academic success.

Rhonda, on the other hand, wanted a more balanced approach to academics when choosing a school. She had one child and has lived in East Flatbush from the time she immigrated to the United States. Rhonda stated, "I wanted a school where the emphasis was on education and also community spirit." She believes that school programs with a heavy focus on academics tend to neglect the social aspect of learning which will only negatively affect the child's performance. This does not mean that Rhonda did not want her child to do well academically, but for her an academic program that was too rigorous was not the best route to success.

When sharing their experiences of attending schools in their home country, the parents noted the emphasis on academics. Rhonda, one of the parents who left their home country over 20 years ago, shared how great emphasis was placed on doing well academically in Grenada. She stated, "I mean they had, of course they had very high standards when it comes to academics. Everything back in the Caribbean is based on academics. Everything was academics." Tia left Grenada when she was 5 years old and has lived in the United States and East Flatbush for 28 years. She shared that, "Academics was a big one. Go to school and you know you do well. You're not going to get 100 on every test, understandable and expected, and you know, but try your best to do well." Wayne left Barbados ten years ago and recalled the immense pressure placed on students to excel academically at both the primary and secondary levels of school:

Primary school was kind of, uh, it was kind of tough. I went to a very challenging school. Uh, so I mean we all have to sit exams. We all have to do an exam to move on into high school, which we call secondary school, and this was to get to the top schools. So, we had all of our students mainly went to the higher grade grading schools in secondary school or high school. So primary school was very tough. It was very challenging.

Lots of extra school, extra schoolwork, and stuff like after-school work. What you guys would call after school programs, but it's also very hands-on. We'll be invited to like our teachers' homes for after school. Then high school or we would call secondary school, it was also very challenging because I went to the third ranked school in the country at the time so for us, we had a lot of classes that would basically prepare us for the first level of college to obtain an associate degree.

For Wayne, there was a lot of pressure to do well in primary exit exams and get good grades in secondary school. However, he saw the experience as a positive one and would want a similar academic focus for his child. Michelle also wanted an academic focused program because of her experience of schooling in Trinidad and Tobago which was also positive in her view. She even contemplates sending her children back to her home country to get the same experience:

I wouldn't mind that they have that same experience 'cause sometimes I look for that same thing here. 'cause sometimes I feel that the teaching here is more laser focus in terms of striving for success in what you do. But, certain aspects I would say yes. In certain aspects, no, but overall I would. I would appreciate having more of a stricter academics here so yes, I wouldn't mind that they go there to go to school.

However, for Kathy and Rena, from Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada respectively, the pressure of doing well in these exit exams was a negative experience for them and did not want the

same academic pressure for their children. The parents' experiences shaped their perceptions of what constitutes a good education or school. This finding supports the claims made in previous research which suggests that immigrant parents' education experience is part of their cultural experience or a tool-kit from which they model their concept or make sense of education (Bulman 2004).

From what the parents shared, I found that the emphasis on academics is similar in the culture of schooling in the different Caribbean countries. However, the value that the parents place on academics when choosing schools in New York City depends on their experience in their country of origin. Whether the academic focus was a positive or negative school experience for the parents determined if they wanted the same for their children.

Location and Security.

For new immigrant parents, academics may not be a top priority as parents are more focused with getting acquainted with both a new education system and way of living. Wayne, who is 25 years old and a recent immigrant, has one child who would be starting elementary school in the upcoming school year. Though he wants a school with a good academic program, he identifies the school environment as a key factor that he would consider when choosing a school for his child to attend:

I'll look at the environment, the location. Obviously, I wouldn't want it to be somewhere too far, or somewhere like in an area I don't know. Not so much of a good neighborhood, for lack of a better word. I will also look at the academics of the school like what are some of the things that she would be learning.

Being a first-time parent and having little experience with New York City's education system, Wayne's primary need in a school is proximity and security. This is understandable since as a recent immigrant Wayne may be still familiarizing himself with many aspects of New York City.

Dianna, a 38-years-old mother of two, shared a similar sentiment and made the comparison between choosing a school for her daughter when she newly immigrated from the St. Vincent and the Grenadines to what she looked for in a school years later with her son:

First it was with my daughter. With her it was new for me so at that point I really didn't know much. What is a good school? What should I look for? Or anything like that. So, for me looking for an elementary school was somewhere that was close within reach of me where I worked, so I would have been able to grab her. So, it was a very convenient school, but yet you know I wanted to know that. OK, is this school good enough? You know academic wise? ... For my son, it was more academics for me. I wanted him to be in a setting where he was able to learn a second language because, you know, I had more sense then. You know, so I looked for things that would benefit him, you know? Later in life. I look for academics one way he could learn a second language and have a good experience.

As a new immigrant Diana had little understanding of the schools available to her and what they offered. Being in an unfamiliar environment it is understandable that she would want a school that is close by. As a result, she was not able to take full advantage of the choice sets and possibly enroll her daughter in the school that may have been best for her. As an immigrant parent, being better acquainted with the education system in New York City and having knowledge of her school options and how they fit into what she wanted placed Diana in a more favorable position to make a better choice for her son.

Tia also shared her mother's experience as a new immigrant having to choose proximity to the home over the academic quality of the school:

I mean my mother, when we moved here, didn't understand, like hey, yes, I have to research this and I have to find out what school is a great school to send them to. My

brother went to the junior high school that was in the neighborhood because he could walk to it. He went to the high school that was in the neighborhood because he could walk to it, and it wasn't a great high school. End of story. It wasn't a great high school.

Similarly, Kathy a mother of two who moved to the US seven years ago from Trinidad, prioritized security when choosing schools for her children. Her primary need in a school was safety therefore, the environment and proximity to home was a major considered in her decision making from the onset:

Safety was my main issue because one of my daughters. She is very quiet and reserved, so my thing was safety. My big problem was being bullied in these schools and having a child with asthma, you know it's a big fear for most parents.

So [that's] why I chose safety first.

Making safety a priority did not mean that Kathy did not want a school with a strong academic program. The same can be said in the case of Tia's mother. Again, not being familiar with the community means that the parents needed to make sure the children were in a safe environment. Though recent immigrants may have to sacrifice the academic quality of a school over location, it is a choice they may make unwillingly or contrary to what they really want for their children.

Discipline, Structure and Respect for authority.

The way a school manages students' behavior is also a feature that some of the parents consider when choosing. Four parents highlighted some aspect of discipline, structure, or respect as important in choosing a school for their children. To these parents, those three elements reflect positively and gave them confidence in having their children attend schools that emphasized these aspects of schooling. For Tia, the ability to enforce discipline was what drew her to her children's elementary school:

If I go to pick them up from school or drop them off in the morning, it's not chaos. I'm not hearing children cursing. Everyone kind of knows where they have to go, There's a nice routine. If I can see that level of consistency every morning and every afternoon that you go pick him up and drop him off, you know during the day that things are going smoothly because they understand that routine is there from the beginning. You know it's not, "Oh I'm gonna walk into the school and I'm having a hoodie on the head and my pants down below." No, everyone in uniform and everyone is expected to be uniform, which is another thing that I love because they kind of keep everyone in a more even playing field.

To Tia, seeing the children following rules and sticking to the routines, dress code as well as their behavior outside of the school are signs of structure and discipline in the school's program.

For Emma, these values were extremely attractive to her because they were a reflection of the way schools are run in her home country, Trinidad:

So, when I went in and I realized it was Caribbean based so, the same values, the same type of work, the same skills that you would teach in Trinidad, in the Caribbean, was what they offered there. So, I was very impressed with that.

Similarly, Dianna also mentioned that when looking at a school for her daughter, the way the children were disciplined attracted her to the school. She responded, "you know, this seems to be like a strict disciplinary, you know It more looks like the disciplinary system of schooling the Caribbean and I like that." Tia, Emma, and Diana found value in the way discipline, respect and structure were enforced in the Caribbean and wanted similar for their children. Emma was the eldest of the parents interviewed and was also a teacher in her home country. Because of Emma's background as a teacher, it was important to her that her children had experiences that were reflective of what she believed to be important in schooling. Wayne expressed the same desire

when asked if he would like his daughter to have the same experience in terms of academics and discipline as he had:

Yeah, to a fair extent yeah. I believe that with what, well, what I've experienced I believe that it kind of formed like I will say like a little bit of stability, or I don't know, but it sets like a blueprint of how I feel you should approach things in your everyday life. It basically maps you out for pretty much life. Yeah, so that's how I see it. So, I would like my child to have that kind of experience. If not the same, well similar.

Again, I found that the parents' experience of schooling in their home country influenced what they wanted for their children in terms of discipline. Some parents were very explicit in their responses of how what they look for in discipline or structure mirrors what schools were like for them in the Caribbean. For other parents, there is a clear connection with what they shared about their school experience in the Caribbean and what they look for in a school in New York City. The parents all had experiences of structure and discipline during their schooling in the Caribbean. However, they had different perspectives of how they would want it enforced for their children. The parents who had a positive experience with discipline and structure wanted schools that would also enforce such standards on students' behavior in this regard.

Dianna was noticeably clear in her response on how her experience of going to school in St. Vincent influenced the schooling she wanted for her children:

I think my own experience has an influence and you know, coming from a Caribbean country, you know where discipline and academics is held very high, I was like, OK, you know I don't want my children just send them to anywhere you know. My experience would have contributed to what I would want for my

children. I'm looking for something like my experience or something that is even better than what I experienced.

Dianna echoes the emphasis placed on discipline in the Caribbean. Her positive experience attending schools with strict structure was the benchmark that she used to choose a school for her children.

Tia and Emma shared that they were especially pleased that many of the teachers in the schools that they chose were from the Caribbean with some also being educators in their home countries. As Emma explained:

The teachers were very much Caribbean based, so they were sticklers for certain things and they already had the foundation, so it was easy to build on that foundation and a lot of the teachers were Caribbean based so they knew exactly what it's like you know from coming from home. Some of them were teachers back home [in the Caribbean] for like 30-40 years, so it was just to transfer that.

Tia similarly stated:

I looked for a school where there were a lot of teachers who were from the Caribbean. And people who looked like my kids. Uhm, because Teachers from the Caribbean, I feel like you know most of them have taught in the Caribbean and then they've moved here and they're teaching again, and so they have those same values that were present in the Caribbean.

For Emma and Tia, having teachers who came from the Caribbean and had similar cultural experiences meant that there would be some shared understanding and value for discipline.

Ronda and Kathy, however, responded negatively in terms of discipline. There was a significant difference with their experience in their home countries and what they want in terms of

discipline in New York City schools. The two parents thought that the way children were disciplined in the Caribbean was too harsh and would not want that rigid structure in the school they chose for their children. Kathy believed that it isn't the school's responsibility to enforce discipline but the job of the home. She explains:

You really don't need that extra discipline if you yourself as a parent could discipline your children at home. I think they can, you know, go to school and say, hey I have to know what to do. I know better from home. So, I see it differently now while these kids are growing up, my daughters are growing up. I see, hey I need to do the job at home first. So yeah, I don't see they need that discipline that we had.

To Rhonda, such rigid or strict programs discourage student individuality. When sharing what wanted in a school for her child she stated:

One where my child can just be able to be herself and not have to be OK, let me see, one that is not militant in a sense that she has to be like she can't do this, or she can't do that. But one where she could express herself and be herself.

Emphasis on discipline was a common experience for all the parents, however, not all the parents found the experience positive and desired the same for their children.

Participants' responses also made clear that their views of structure and discipline within schools were also culturally influenced. All the parents interviewed come from English-speaking Caribbean countries with a history of British colonization. Shared histories mean shared beliefs on social constructs such as child rearing (Roopnarine et al, 2006). Research on parenting in the British Caribbean found that parents and families take the socialization of their children seriously and generally run strict households, emphasizing proper conduct and respect for authority (Durbrow, 1999; Wilson et.al, 2003).

Though discipline was a common experience and desired element for most parents' school choice, they had different perspectives on what discipline entails. For Rhonda and Kathy, their responses connected discipline with corporal punishment and as such didn't want their children to have such strict experiences in their schools. Tia on the other hand, interpreted discipline to mean the way the children carried themselves in and out of the school and the way they approach their learning. To Tia, discipline is also tied to having structure in the classroom and the school climate. She shared how her daughter's kindergarten teacher set a great precedent for the students by giving them clear expectations:

[H]er teacher was from the Caribbean, and she held the students accountable. Yes, they were in kindergarten, but she set such a great precedent for them so that way going forward, they understand. Hey, I have to do this in class. This is what's expected of me and I'll do it. And if it's not done well, then these are the consequences. This is what will happen and I like that. So that's something that I look for in a school.

Setting clear goals may be the teacher's way of steering the child's learning. Tia perceived this as having structure and fostering discipline in the students.

A study on how Black and Latinx parents evaluate the discipline of schools in urban communities found that the parents' perception of discipline is not solely based on rewards and punishment. Instead, "parental preferences for discipline should be viewed as a means to deliver a range of important educational goals, both academic and developmental" (Golann et al. 2019, p.3). The study reveals that the view on discipline is not the same among the two minority groups as perceived. I found the same to be true among the parents I interviewed. Although the parents are from the same region and have shared cultures, their views on discipline are not monolithic. Again, this can be tied to the varying experiences that the parents had in their home country.

Parent-Teacher Relationship.

Having a good relationship with the teachers was also a factor some of the parents considered when choosing schools. Four parents responded that being able to communicate with the teachers on any issue about their child was important to them. Tia appreciates being able to get timely feedback from the teachers in her son's school:

I felt like all of his teachers have been very thorough and if I have a question about OK, well, how's he doing? They give me an answer. It's not brushed off, you know? If I wrote a note to them, I would always get a response. You know, if I had a question on how to help him with something and make it better, you know, -make him understand it better. I got a response. That goes to the school culture. You know, because I, if I have a concern academically with my child and I'm not getting a response from the teachers that shows that that parent-teacher connection isn't there and it happens in schools. It's not if the teacher wrote me a letter or put a note in his backpack, they got a response. You know, so things like that. Things like that I look for because they are important to me.

Having such a good relationship with her son's teachers, the decision to have her daughter attend the same school was an easy one for Tia. Communication and feedback between teacher and parent were also concerns for Rhonda. She believed that having a relationship with the teachers gave a "sense of community" in the school. The elementary school Rhonda chose for her child gave the parents frequent opportunities to go to the school, interact with the teachers and see what the children are learning. Kathy also shared the importance of being able to have effective communication with her child's teacher. Kathy believes that "having communication is key to know where your child stand and what you need progress on." Being informed about what is

happening in her child's school is something that Donna considers essential in her choice of school as well:

I look for a school that has great communication skills. I need to be able to know everything that is going on with my child. Whether academically, health wise, whatever it may be, I need to know. I feel if a school isn't keeping you up to date with everything that there's problems.

From the responses, it is evident that the parents want to play an active role in the education of their children and be knowledgeable of what happens in the school.

Parents' emphasis in this study on academics, structure, or discipline are consistent with the English-speaking Caribbean culture (Nehaul, 1999; Wilson et.al., 2003). However, the parents' views on parent-teacher relationships show a shift in the traditional views on the role of the teacher and parent when it comes to schooling. Traditionally, teaching and learning in the Caribbean is very teacher-centered. The teacher is considered the sole bearer of knowledge and an authority figure who the child must always obey and never go against (Escayg & Kinkead-Clark, 2018). For the traditional Caribbean parent, no news from the teacher is good news because it means that the child is disciplined and obedient. Kathy's experience is an example of the authority parents placed on teachers with educating and disciplining their children:

If we come to school and we don't have the homework, they used to discipline us by hitting us on our hands. The parents you know, we tell the parents, the parents will say, OK. You know, you deserve it because you didn't finish.

The traditional Caribbean parent left schooling to the teacher. The parents seldom questioned what was taught or how the children were disciplined in school.

At the turn of the 21st Century, across the English-speaking Caribbean, the view of the teacher changed. Teacher preparation programs and education ministries across the region now

take a more student-centered approach to teaching that encourages community and family connection in the learning process (Marshall, Thomas & Robinson, 2017). The established immigrant parents I interviewed left their home countries well before this change in teaching style was widely implemented in schools in the Caribbean. However, all parents see feedback and a working relationship with their children's teacher and school as particularly important for the child's academic development as well as a positive sign of teacher accountability. This contradicts the traditional or cultural view of the parent-teacher relationship but again sheds light on how the parents' positive or negative experience influence school choice for their children. Parents in this study want to be a part of their children's learning. Whether the parents chose a charter school, public school, or private school, they liked that the parents were active in the school, and they were able to have effective communication with the teachers.

Type of School Parents Choose

Parents' responses to questions about their own educational experiences and what they looked for in choosing a school for their children indicates that the parents hold strong to many of the same values of education that they experienced in their respective Caribbean countries. How does this value translate to the type of school they choose for their children? Based on the parents' responses, the characteristics they found to be ideal in a school were not indicative of a particular type of school in the New York City school system. I found that schools vary within and across the public, charter, and private sectors. Five parents chose public elementary schools, three parents went the charter school route, and one parent preferred the private school option.

Public School.

The parents who chose public school had varied reasons for their decision. For Tia and Wayne, one reason for their choice was because the public schools gave children a better representation of the real world since they would interact with children from different socio-

economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. At the time of the interview Wayne did not yet choose a school for his daughter but explained his preference:

I think my preference would probably be public school. I feel like public schools prepare you for the entire world. I don't think like it is limited. For me, some schools are kind of limited in ethics and student background for other reasons, but I feel public school is better in my opinion.

Tia also explains her reason for choosing a public school:

With public school I think, the kids do get a good understanding of let's see, quote unquote, "real world living." 'Cause you're gonna come across kids who have it and kids who don't. You're gonna have to learn how to deal with that. You know, I think. Uhm, children are so impressionable and at one point I wanted to teach social studies, so this is a strong point for me. Children need to understand other cultures and I just, you know, I'm not just talking about like racial cultures, but you know economic cultures. You'll find a little bit more diversity in in public schools.

Emma started her children off in private schools then transferred to public school after the first year. She expressed that after doing research she realized that the public school she chose had "the same standard of education" as the private school she initially went with. The fact that the teaching staff was Caribbean immigrants was also an advantage that Emma as well as Tia considered when making their decision. Michelle chose a public school because family members attended the school and had had a positive academic experience. For Tia, Emma, and Michelle the public school also had the strong academic focus that they wanted.

Charter School.

Three parents believed that charter school had the characteristics that matched what they wanted in a school for their children. For Kathy and Rhonda, the charter school fostered better

parent-teacher relationships and gave frequent feedback on the children's academic progress and updates on their safety. However, Rhonda later transferred her child to a public school. In her response to the question about the type of school she chose, Rhonda stated:

Because of the rigor of the work and how the school was structured. I noticed certain changes in my kid, so I pulled her. All the emphasis was placed on passing and doing it in a timely fashion. So, to me she became a little depressed about it and she started failing.

Donna on the other hand embraced the strict discipline and rigorous academics of the charter school. She explained,

I prefer charter school because it is more hands-on and one-on-one based. Charter schools give the children more attention to grow within the school. I mean, they have their own curriculum that they follow to ensure that students get the education they need. And also, they are more strict, more strict when it come to academics and structure. The children have more flexibility and are challenged to their full potential a lot more than in public school, I think.

Again, I found that the parents had varied reasons for choosing a charter school which suggests that the option had the ability to meet many of the characteristics that parents may want. Looking at Rhonda and Donna's responses, charters embodied the academic, discipline and parent-teacher relationship features they desired.

Private School.

Peter is a recent immigrant from Grenada and is the only parent to choose a private elementary school because he believed that the school offered a better academic program that would give more individualized attention to his child.

I personally rather the private schools here. I think they offer better teachers, school safety and strong academics. To me, they also pay closer attention to the children's needs as well. I mean, it could be because parents are paying for the service, and a lot too, that they are more on the ball and offer so much more. In that case, I rather pay for a better service for my child.

Although Tia chose a public school, she mentioned that she did initially want a private school because she thought private schools had a more extensive curriculum which gave the students more exposure and opportunities. However, because of the tuition cost attached to private schools, Tia could not consider this option.

I would have liked for them to go to a private school. I've done some observations and student teaching there [a private school], and I really liked it. What they do, what they stand for? Uhm, however When you don't have that type of money. It is hard and you know \$40,000 a year and up, depending on the grade level. That's a lot of money. Do they offer the kids a lot? Yes, they do. Ideally it would have been great. It wasn't in the cards.

Though the parents had their school preference, they were all aware of the other school options available to them. The school characteristics that they believed were important in their decision making were also the features of the schools they chose whether public, charter, or private school. In East Flatbush and its surrounding neighborhoods, many of the early elementary services or centers are ran by Caribbean immigrants. Additionally, many of the elementary schools whether public, charter or private, are also staffed and headed by teachers with a West Indian background. Having a large concentration of people from the Caribbean living in East Flatbush can be viewed as an advantage for the parents in the area. Having cultural representation in the schools means that

there is a greater chance of some aspect of their educational values being embedded in any of the schools in their neighborhood.

Influence of Parent's Social Network on Choice

Most of the parents explained that they chose the school they did because it met all they wanted for their child. However, I found that the recommendations from family or friends in their community who had some experience with the schools also influenced how they chose. Tia, Michelle, Kathy, Rhonda, and Kathy all mentioned recommendations made by a family member or friend for the school they chose. When I asked Kathy how she learned about charter schools she explained:

So, I started off with friends. You know, even someone that I used to work with, my boss. She actually introduced me to the charter school system, and I had a friend who actually was already in the charter school system. Uh, she, my friend, was a bit skeptical, she had just started off, but she also thought I needed that for my daughter, shy and having asthma, you know, I needed that safety ground. So, she suggested that.

For Kathy, the recommendation from a friend who knew what she wanted was a welcomed resource to help her choose a school. As a new immigrant with no experience with the New York City school system, Kathy's social network was her main source of information.

For many immigrants, their main resources in navigating New York City and all its systems are their family, friends, and their neighborhoods. Tia gave great insight on how social networks are utilized among immigrant parents navigate the school system:

Yes, word of mouth is wonderful. It can be a curse and a blessing. It's wonderful when it's used for good. You know, saying yeah, "you know what that school is not that great" or "Maybe you should think about that school." It's great for that to help

other people out, and that is something that I wish everybody would do a little bit more of. Well, we're going off tangent if I say that, but yes, I do believe you know having that word of mouth and having people who think like you, which is why I know you know some people think about like the neighborhoods being segregated, and you know there's a little Chinatown and there's like a little Caribbean and there's like a little this, but you go to live where you understand the people around you and that way you can get those great resources like hey, that's a better school than that one. So, being where you know, being in a neighborhood with people you can communicate with? Yes, definitely a plus.

Although, in a new country, immigrants do look for ways to connect to their culture and pass on values and traditions to their children. Tia also recognizes that one's social network when choosing schools can have its disadvantages. I found that although parents in this study had similar experiences with schooling in the Caribbean, they do not all want their children to have the same or similar schooling in the US. While some parents will appreciate a more structured and academically rigid program, others did not want the same for their children. The perceptions one may have of a school can also influence whether they would recommend it to someone else. Regardless, "word of mouth" is highly regarded by some parents to find the education program that would be best. When parents receive positive or negative information from other parents about schools, they tend to consider the information valuable and use it when making their decision (Fong, 2018). For new immigrants not familiar with the education system, it is a way to learn about schools available and the process of choosing from someone who at least has some understanding of your needs and cultural background.

Though the parents take into consideration the advice from family or friends on school choice, I observed that the established immigrants who are parents with more than one child were

able to make a more informed decision. For example, Tia, Michelle, and Donna attended school in New York City from the elementary and middle school levels and expressed more knowledge of the different programs that are available in the school they chose. Diana, Rhonda, and Emma worked in New York City schools and therefore were able to use the knowledge through their employment to make informed decisions. This reflects Schneider et al. (1998b), findings that the level of knowledge parents have on schools and school choice will influence the type of school they choose.

Culture and School Perceptions

The parents' school choices can be further analyzed by looking at the relationship between culture and the perception they have of schools. There are certain perceptions of the different types of schools that can influence how parents choose. Ogbu (1998), cultural ecology theory claims that the history of "voluntary minorities" such as Caribbean immigrants impacts their views on education. Ogbu's theory refers more so to the differences in race related experiences between immigrants and Black Americans and not their cultural beliefs. From the interviews I conducted, I found that the perception that some of the parents had of schools came from their individual experiences with the school and not general perceptions held by the Caribbean community. For example, because of her experience with public schools Kathy believed that public schools lacked structure and discipline:

So, with the public schools, you know. Having experience being in public schools, 'cause I've been in public schools and many times and when you get there you can see the difference of the children not respecting the teachers not even just the teachers but whoever adult that is around. And that is the first thing you see.

Secondly, in a classroom, they are not organized, so not being organized is also, hey

you don't want your child there. And thirdly, you don't get communication with the teacher themselves.

For Tia, her perception of charter schools was based on the experience of other parents:

So, for charter, I didn't want to go that route. Like I said, I believe that you know, there should be a balance between play and work and I've have had clients and, my other friends who've had their children in charter and it's, you know, it's more of a work, work, work. Let's work, work, work, work, work all day long, and I think kids need a break.

The notion of charter schools over emphasis on academics and structure and the public school's lack thereof are common perceptions among parents in urban settings (Golann et al., 2019).

However, from the general responses, parents' choices do not show preference for one type of school over another based on these conceptions. The parents who chose public schools did so because of the academic program, structure and discipline and accountability of the teachers – features that are often linked to charter schools. Ironically, two of the parents who chose charter schools disliked the strict approaches to academics and discipline.

Studies that look at discipline in urban schools find the strict approach of charter schools especially attract minorities. No-excuse charter schools such as Success Academy and KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) approach to learning emphasize following the rules and academic success (Golann et.al, 2019; Lack, 2009). The students are expected to always wear uniforms appropriately and follow classroom routines. The emphasis on conformity and uniformity mirrors what schools are like in the English-speaking Caribbean which immigrant parents may view as a more familiar setting for their children. What Diana shared on the rule of law when it comes to dress code and conformity is an example of how it is possible for immigrants to draw similarities between charter schools and their school experience:

The schools are very strict. You know when it comes to the uniforms and everything like that, so you know we had a prefect system as well where you know, we were divided into colored houses. So, you know the prefect will come around and check your shoes and make sure that your shoes are white. Your belt and everything, you have e your badges on and if you didn't have those on you, you get bad marks. There's a book, we call them bad marks and those are calculated like every end of term. Then in assembly we had honorable mention and dishonorable mention. So, if you had more than like 50 bad marks, you were considered to be in dishonorable mention. But once your academics was over 90 or a certain grade level then you would have gotten an honorable mention.

Diana chose a charter school because she believed it offered her children a school experience like what she had in her home country. But, what about the parents who are looking for the same structure and discipline but choose the public school?

From the interviews, I observed that the parents who chose public schools and wanted schools with qualities believed to be aligned with charter schools stated that that many of the teachers in the schools were from the Caribbean. The teachers have the same values and expectations as teachers in the Caribbean with regards to education. Having teachers who can connect with the cultural values of the children is an advantage that parents may identify when choosing schools. Two of the parents also noted that some of the teachers come with qualifications and teaching experience from their home countries. Having shared values not only benefits the academic development of the children but also positively impacts the relationships that parents can have with the teachers and the school community.

Strong academic programs, good parent-teacher relationship, and discipline are common characteristics that parents seek in a school. However, the participants do not link those

characteristics to a particular school type. Based on the reasons parents gave for choosing a school, one cannot assume that all immigrants prefer one type of school over the other. Some parents chose one type of school but acknowledged that they can find what they want in other types of schools as well. Rhonda's insight into why she transferred her daughter from charter to public school also shows that even when parents may be dissatisfied with their choices, they are aware that the other school options can meet their needs. Moreover, although parents may have certain requirements in the schools they chose, their decisions were also shaped by matters of convenience, be it the school being close to home or the after-school services available.

I identified cultural background as one of the primary forces shaping parents' school choice. The culture of schooling in the parents' home countries shaped their school experiences which in turn influenced their perceptions and value on education and schooling. The culture and experiences are ingrained in the parents and changed little even though many are living in a new country for many years. For instance, Tia left Grenada when she was only seven years old and spent the least amount of time in her home country compared to the other parents interviewed. However, she expressed an extraordinarily strong connection to the cultural values and expectations of Grenada through her parents. Opinions on education are influenced by culture which can be passed on from first- generation immigrants to second or even third generations (Behambari, Tavassoli & Noghani, 2020).

The close connection of immigrant families within diaspora communities such as East Flatbush allows families such as Tia's to uphold and pass on their beliefs on education and academic success whether they have a close connection or frequently visit their home country. Culture retention within East Flatbush itself also facilitates the transmission of culturally influenced beliefs through the activities and organizations established by immigrants from the different Caribbean islands. During the summer months, many groups and organizations from

various Caribbean countries hold cultural days to celebrate the culture and history of their specific islands. Events such as Grenada Day, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines or Vincy Day are family events that bring together people from the respective islands to highlight their culture, share resources, and create connections in the diaspora.

Being new to a country, not having or not being aware of the resources that are available to choose a school are barriers that minority groups such as Caribbean immigrants face (Phillips, Larsen & Hausman, 2015). Five of the parents I interviewed shared that they chose a school based on the recommendations of a family member or friend. Established immigrants, Tia, Michelle, and Dianna supplemented the recommendations with their own research while Rhonda and Kathy relied solely on the advice they received. The fact that some parents had more than one child means that they were able to use their experience from their first child as well as their own experience in New York City schools as in Tia and Michelle's case. Though the recent immigrant parents I interviewed did not emphasize academics as much as the established parents, this does not mean that they are less interested in a school with a high-quality academic program. The cultural retention and close community networks established in East Flatbush allows new immigrants to readily access information to help in their decision making.

Conclusion

Though the sample of the parents in this study is small, I was able to gain valuable insight into the thought process of Caribbean immigrants when choosing schools. The parents are from five (5) different Caribbean countries, but a shared colonial history implicates similarities in the values and education system. Academics, safety, structure, discipline, and parent-teacher relationships are the areas of interest for the nine parents when it comes to the school of choice for their children in the US. However, how these parents interpret these areas in their decision-making

depends on how they perceive their own educational experiences in their home countries as well as their knowledge and experience of school here in New York City.

The information obtained from these parents about their experiences and what they look for in a school for their children shows there is much more to consider when looking at what influences school choice besides parent income and education status. For the East Flatbush parents in this study, coming from different countries in the Caribbean and living in the United States for a varied amount of time, culture played a significant role in their decision making and perspectives on education and schooling for their children. There were similarities in what the parents look for in a school however, they did not ascribe the characteristics to a particular type of school. Instead, they were able to find what they were looking for in different schools in their East Flatbush neighborhood.

Implications

Regardless of the small sample of West Indian parents interviewed for the study, there are implications for how we address cultural responsiveness in New York City schools. The influence that culture has on what immigrant parents in this study expect from New York City schools shows that culturally responsive teaching may need to entail more than addressing the cultural needs of the children during classroom instruction. A comprehensive approach that considers the academic, social, and disciplinary programs that reflects or considers the cultural values of the students from West Indian parentage is worth exploring. The public charter schools in East Flatbush seem to understand this and advertise their aim to meet the cultural needs of the students through a culturally inclusive curriculum.

Based on the responses of the parents interviewed, having teachers that share the cultural background of the students is a way to ensure the incorporation of the structure and discipline that they value in the classroom. The teaching staff must reflect the cultural background of the

community and by extension the student body of East Flatbush schools. Charters such as Success Academy in East Flatbush also take a no-excuses approach in the way they discipline, a feature geared mostly towards the interest of their Black and Latinx parents. However, the varied perceptions or definitions of discipline expressed by the parents means that these schools may need to evaluate the blanket characterizations made on racial groups and the policies they may have made based on these conceptions.

The New York City Department of Education emphasizes cultural responsiveness through its culturally responsive-sustaining education initiative (NYC Department of Education, 2022). The strategy uses the diverse backgrounds of the students as a valuable source of knowledge in students' learning. Considering that cultural representation is a key part of culturally responsive teaching, there is still a lack of teaching staff that represents the diverse immigrant student body. Based on the New York State Education Department Educator Diversity Report, there is an underrepresentation of teachers of color in New York City schools with approximately 80% of the students being students of color yet 42% teachers of color (New York State Education Department, 2019). Even within the percentage of teachers of color, the description "Black or African American" used in most of these reports use does not acknowledge the variation of black culture. This variation implicates differences in social and academic values. The influence that culture has on the parents' school choice in this study implies that the representation of teaching staff to the student body should be culture-based rather than race-based. It is therefore important to identify cultural origins within racial groups to effectively address diversity.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANT PARENTS IN EAST FLATBUSH BROOKLYN.

Identifying questions

1. How many children do you have?
2. What is your country of origin?
3. How long have you been living in the US?
4. What level of schooling did you have before leaving your country of origin?
5. What level of school did you obtain in the US?

Content Questions

6. Tell me a bit about what schooling was like in your country of origin. What type of school did you attend? What was the learning experience like?
7. Would you like if your child is/was able to have the same school experience as you had? Why or why not? What do/did you look for in a school for your child?
8. Why are/were those characteristics important to you? Do you think your own school experience influences the type of schooling you want for your child? Do you think your background influences the types of schooling you want for your child? If so, how?
9. What type of elementary school did/ does your child attend? What was/is the reason for your choice/preference?
10. How did you learn about this type of school?
11. Are you familiar with other types of schools? What do think about the other school choice options?
12. How do/did you go about choosing a school?

13. Do you have any concerns about school options for your child? Are you satisfied with the school options available in your area?

Thank you for sharing. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the school choice for your child? Is there anything that you wished I asked?

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