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Minority Parents and School Choice: A Multiple Case Study

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Minority Parents and School Choice: A Multiple Case Study

By

Jeannette M. Boursiquot

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents; Deacon Jean-Baptiste Boursiquot and the late Mrs. Alma Boursiquot.

Thank you for your unconditional love and for being the best parents anyone could ask for! I owe everything to both of you; all my love to you forever!!!!

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There are many who helped me along the way on this journey. I want to take a moment to thank them.

First and foremost, I would like to thank God. He has given me strength and encouragement throughout all the challenging moments of completing this dissertation. I am truly grateful for His unconditional and endless love, mercy, and grace. I would like to express the deepest appreciation for my Ed.D.

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ABSTRACT

Low levels of academic achievement among minority students in U.S. schools continues to be problematic. Although school choice, via enrollment in public charter or private schools, is one strategy that may improve academic achievement among minorities, little is known about how parents of minority students understand and exercise school choice. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore understandings of school choice among parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. The framework consisted of three theories: bounded rationality, the economic theory of school choice, and critical race theory. Data were collected via three focus groups with parents from three types of schools. . Through axial coding, a total of seven themes were identified, including definitions of school choice provided by minority parents, social perceptions of school choice, economic perceptions of school choice are negative, strategies used to access information, factors in parents' school choice decisions, school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable, and parents should be informed of school choice. Eleven subthemes emerged, including parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students, tools available for school choice, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, networking, proactive research, financial factors, student-level factors, parent preference factors, and school-level factors. While school choice has the potential to improve academic outcomes for minority students, the current research highlighted challenges in parent's decision-making processes that may undermine the potential of school choice to improve educational equity.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background and Introduction

Low levels of academic achievement among minority students in U.S. schools continues to be problematic, "despite the rhetoric of American equality" (Darling-Hammond, 2001, p. 208). A large contributor to these low performance levels is the result of economics; minority students are usually concentrated in poorly funded schools in inner cities or rural locales (Darling-Hammond, 2001). The most direct consequence of this academic underperformance is the high rate of dropout among minority students – the effects of which are far worse for minority students than Whites (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Rates of high school dropout are associated with a number of poor health outcomes and increased criminality (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2014), and are highest among poor and minority students (Maynard et al., 2015). Although a reduction has occurred in the rate of high school dropout among the general student population, the rate remains high among racial minorities and students of low socioeconomic status (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013).

In response to concerns about failing schools and the perpetual academic underperformance of minority students, a number of reform efforts have occurred (Merrit et al., 2018). One of these efforts, school choice, has been the source of much controversy in recent years (Levin, 2018). School choice programs provide parents with a number of tools to help them actively choose the schools their children attend, rather than accepting default assignments to public schools based on residence (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). Public school choice strategies can include moving to a specific neighborhood in order to attend a desired public school or enrolling in public charter schools. Private school choice involves enrolling in private schools,

either through self-financing, government vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or education savings accounts (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). As Waitoller and Lubienski (2019) explained,

> Both the underlying logic and the explicit promises of these [school choice] policies contend that poorer children are trapped in the failing schools to which they are assigned, whereas wealthier families can leverage choice by choosing a private school or by moving to a more desirable area with better public schools (p. 1).

In this way, school choice has the potential to reduce educational inequities.

Advocates of school choice "believe that increasing choice forces schools to compete for students, thereby boosting educational quality and promoting better matches between students and schools" (Abdulkadiroˇglu et al., 2018, p. 175). Support for school choice is on the rise among minorities (Ortega, 2017). A recent poll by the American Federation for Children (2017) revealed that 75% of Hispanic families and 72% of African American families supported school choice. This growing support for school choice among minorities is also evidenced in the increased enrollment of minority students in private and charter schools (Ortega, 2017). For example, while Hispanic students comprise 25% of the traditional public-school population, they represent 30% of charter school enrollments (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

According to Ortega (2017), ample evidence indicates that minority students may not be well-served by the public school system, due to violence, low academic standards, and ineffective educators. Minority students enrolled in traditional public schools continue to demonstrate dismal levels of academic success compared to their White peers, and many researchers have provided convincing evidence that charter and private schools may contribute to greater academic achievement among these students. One of the first studies on the topic, led by

James Coleman (1981) in his now infamous investigation, *High School and Beyond*, revealed that students enrolled in private Catholic schools learned more and demonstrated higher rates of high school graduation than those enrolled in traditional public schools. Of particular salience to the current investigation was that these benefits were more pronounced among minority students. Research on the academic benefits of enrolling in nontraditional school indicated that although differences in standardized test scores are nominal, students enrolled in private schools are significantly less likely to drop out than those enrolled in traditional public schools (West, 2016).

School voucher programs, which provide parents and guardians with government-issued vouchers to enroll their children in participating private schools, is one strategy that may help close some aspects of the achievement gap. Vouchers are awarded through a lottery system, and eligibility is often based on a student's socioeconomic status (Peterson et al., 1998). Essentially, school voucher programs seek to provide private school access to underserved populations (Fleming et al., 2013).

Because of persistent racial disparities in academic outcomes, it is important to emphasize strategies that show promise for improving academic performance among minority students. Although school choice, via enrollment in public charter or private schools, is one strategy that may improve academic achievement among minorities (particularly in terms of reducing high school dropout rates), little is known about how parents of minority students understand and exercise school choice. Further, because of prominent arguments against school choice from those who contend that it results in "cream skimming" and the propagation of systemic racism and segregation (Levin, 2018), minority parents may have skewed understandings of what school choice really is. Thus, the aim of this multiple case study was to

explore understandings of school choice among parents of students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public.

This chapter provides an introduction to the investigation. It begins with the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. Details are provided of the theoretical framework, with is comprised of economic and race theories that created a valuable lens through which to examine the research questions. The method and design are briefly described, followed by conceptual definitions of key terms. Study assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are presented. The significance and potential social implications are also discussed. The chapter closes with a summary and transition to the literature review.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of the research was persistent academic underperformance among minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). A dire consequence of this underperformance is a high rate of dropout among minorities – effects of which are far worse for minority students than Whites (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Maynard et al., 2015). Although the dropout rate has fallen among the general student population, it remains high among racial minorities (Balfanz et al., 2013).

Research indicates that minority students learn more and are more likely to graduate when they attend private and charter schools (West, 2016). However, school choice has historically been examined with contention, as it is often associated with propagation of segregation and racism (Levin, 2018). Today, charter schools and vouchers for private education improve access to school choice among minority students; however, it is unclear what minority parents know about school choice and whether they are aware of the school choice tools

available to them. By examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to higher quality education.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore understandings of school choice among parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, which included what they knew about available tools, such as lotteries and voucher programs; (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, which included any positive and negative experiences parents had when exercising school choice; and (c) overall perceptions of school choice, which included parents' attitudes and perceptions toward school choice, based on their experiences and the information provided to them. By examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to high quality education.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the proposed study:

RQ1. How do racial minority parents of elementary school students define school choice?

RQ2. What are racial minority parents' social and economic perceptions of school choice?

RQ3. Within the framework of bounded rationality, how do racial minority parents access information, learn, and make decisions regarding school choice?

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research consisted of three theories: bounded rationality (Simon, 1957), the economic theory of school choice (Betts, 2005), and critical race theory (Delgado, 1995).

Bounded Rationality

Simon's (1957) bounded rationality is an economic theory that purports individuals make decisions based on cognitive limitations and the information available to them. Instead of viewing decision-making as a completely rational process, bounded rationality acknowledges that the rationality of any decision is always bound by the information available to an individual, as well as his or her capacity to process that information.

Bounded rationality (Simon, 1957) provides a foundation for examining the decisions that parents make regarding school choice. The aim of this study was to explore understandings of school choice among parents with students enrolled in three types of schools; this exploration of understanding of school choice specifically involved *how* they make school choice decisions. Simon's theory suggested that parents' decisions vary depending on the information available to them, as well as their abilities to understand and navigate that information. For example, exercising school choice via the application of school vouchers requires that parents understand voucher programs are available to them, in the first place. However, even if parents understand school choice and the availability of vouchers, they then must understand how to leverage that knowledge to apply for vouchers. In this way, bounded rationality allowed the researcher to examine school choice understandings and decisions more critically among minority parents.

Based on bounded rationality theory, the researcher expected that parents' ideas, experiences, and perceptions of school choice would vary based on the information they had access to, along with their abilities to discern that information. For example, if a minority parent had not sought out information about school choice but had only received information about it from bipartisan political news stations, his or her understandings of school choice may be skewed. Alternatively, if a minority parent had access to factual information about school choice

and related programs but did not possess the cognitive abilities to understand and utilize that information, their experiences and ideas of school choice may vary from parents who do possess the abilities to understand and utilize information on behalf of their children.

Economic Theory of School Choice

While Simon's (1957) theory provides an excellent lens for viewing parents' decision-making, relative to school choice, it fails to highlight important economic elements of school choice. Thus, the second theory that comprised the framework for this research was Betts' (2005) economic theory of school choice. Economic theory provided a valuable lens for examining school choice and the racial achievement gap. Although opponents often argue that school choice will create a widening of the achievement gap, Betts' theory argues that school choice actually has the potential to improve educational quality while reducing the achievement gap.

Although public school choice is limited to families' residential decisions, choices to attend public charters and private schools (via voucher programs) may even the economic playing field and provide minority students with access to higher quality education. In addition, by increasing the competition among schools to attract students, school choice may force schools to improve in several ways. Betts (2005) argued that when markets are composed of large numbers of buyers (students) and sellers (schools), a condition of perfect competition may emerge. If there are enough schools to choose from, and if parents possess the power to determine which schools their children will attend, parents are likely select the schools that best fit the needs and interests of their children (Betts, 2005). Schools will have to improve to meet the demands of the buyers (students), or risk losing them. The loss of students, regardless of the school setting (traditional public, public charter, or private) can have severe financial consequences for schools. Essentially, Betts argued that educational equality can be improved

through the creation of a competitive market, achieved via school choice. The key to achieving equity through school choice is more even distribution of educational resources for each family. Betts explained,

> Those who are concerned that choice will widen existing inequalities in outcomes should favor choice programs that level the playing field in favor of the poor. Two ways of achieving this in some parts are either to set geographic or other quotas for each school's student body or to use more sophisticated market mechanisms that force schools in more affluent areas to compensate schools in less affluent areas for the right to enroll above-average shares of high-achieving students. (p. 24)

The economic theory of school choice could influence the school choice decisions of minority parents because it is fair to say that most parents naturally want what is best for their children. This may mean sending them to the best schools they have access to. If schools are forced to compete with one another to attract students, economic theory suggests that such competition could raise the standards for schools, providing even better educational opportunities for students from diverse demographic backgrounds.

Critical Race Theory

Bounded rationality provided an important lens for examining decision-making, while the economic theory of school choice was useful for examining the economic underpinnings of school choice. However, in the context of the current investigation, a race-related theory was also needed to examine the topic from the perspectives of minority parents. Accordingly, critical race theory (CRT; Delgado, 1995) was useful for unpacking any racial and cultural themes that emerged from the study. According to Delgado (1995), CRT is based on the notion that racism is a deeply entrenched and normalized part of our culture. As Ladson-Billings (1998) explained,

racism "is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture" (p. 11). Scholars of CRT leverage stories and experiential knowledge from those who have experienced the racism which systematically pervades every major institution in the country (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This theory also provides a necessary criticism of liberalism, challenging the notions that great strides have been made toward equality in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. CRT argues that equality cannot be truly achieved with the slow, incremental changes that have occurred in recent decades; rather, addressing racism requires large, sweeping changes.

In the context of education, CRT is appropriate when one can acknowledge that racism continues to be a significant factor impeding educational equity in the United States. CRT purports that racism is deeply engrained in American life – the effects of which inevitably spill over into the educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016). When considering the achievement gap between White and minority students, some argue that it is socioeconomic status, not race, that is to blame. To this end, Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that "the cause of their poverty in conjunction with the condition of their schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism" (p. 55).

Similarly, in the context of education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2016) applied CRT to criticize the ineffectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that today's students experience more segregation than ever before. As previously mentioned, a substantial cause of underachievement among minority students is the fact that minority students are more likely to live in poorer areas with underfunded schools, less effective teachers, and poor access to educational resources (Ortega, 2017). A number of other neoliberal educational policies, such as standardized testing, school grades, and racially aggregated test data, may create racial barriers

that can be examined via CRT, in light of school choice policies. CRT provided a valuable lens for examining the race-related topics of school choice and school vouchers, as these tools may provide minority students with access to higher quality education – in a sense, reducing educational inequities.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this investigation was qualitative, and it followed a multiple case study design. Qualitative research is useful for exploring phenomena in natural contexts, which allows researchers to interpret and make sense of phenomena according to the meanings assigned by the individuals who experience those phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The phenomenon that served as the focus of this study was school choice, as experienced and perceived by parents of minority students. While quantitative investigations result in findings that possess statistical certainty and which may be generalized to larger populations (Khan, 2014), these types of studies primarily aim at assessing relationships between predetermined study variables. In addition, findings from quantitative investigations lack the depth that is available through qualitative inquiry. Because the aim of the current investigation was not to assess the statistical significance of relationships between predetermined variables, or generalize results to larger populations, a qualitative method was selected.

The design selected for this research was multiple case study. Case study designs are appropriate for broad examinations of topics that leverage more than one data source (Yin, 2003). By utilizing multiple data sources, case study researchers can develop holistic and dynamic understandings of study phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A multiple case study design allowed the researcher to examine the research phenomena within three different contexts, based on the type of schools attended by students of participating parents. This study

consisted of three cases, defined as parents with students attending (a) private schools, (b) public charter schools, and (c) traditional public schools. In this way, the researcher was able to examine similarities and differences that existed in parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice and associated tools and resources.

Participants included parents of elementary school students who are enrolled at private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district. Data were collected via a single focus group for each of the three cases, for a total of three focus groups. Five parents will participate in each focus groups, creating a total sample of 15 parents. To be eligible to participate in the study, individuals must be (a) over the age of 18 years, (b) be a racial minority, and (c) be the parent of an elementary school student currently enrolled in a private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district.

Focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The researcher followed a focus group protocol (Appendix A) that was developed prior to data collection and validated via review from subject matter experts. Audio recordings from each of the three focus groups were professionally transcribed and then thematically analyzed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures for data analysis. Findings were interpreted within the aforementioned theoretical framework and are reported in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Key Terms

Key terms for this study are defined as follows.

Academic performance. As described by York, Gibson, and Rank (2015), academic performance is the academic success demonstrated by a student, which is usually conceptualized as performance on standardized tests, grade point average, or rate of high school graduation.

Elementary school. An elementary school consists of one or more grades between kindergarten and sixth grade, not to exceed eighth grade (Broughman & Swaim, 2016).

High school graduation rate. High school graduation rate describes the percentage of students who have completed high school within 4 years of first entry into ninth grade (Stetser & Stillwell, 2014).

Private school. A private school is one that is not supported by public funds, which provides classroom construction for one or more grade levels, and which is staffed by one or more teachers (Broughman & Swaim, 2016).

Public charter school. Public charter schools are nonprofit K-12 educational institutions that operate around curricular themes or philosophies, are provided with budgetary autonomy, and are funded by the state (Walters, 2018).

School choice. School choice describes programs that provide parents with a number of tools to help them choose the schools their children attend, rather than accepting default assignments to public schools based on residence (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016).

School voucher. School vouchers are tools that provide parents and guardians with government-issued vouchers to enroll their children in participating private schools. Vouchers are awarded through a lottery system and eligibility is often based on a student's socioeconomic status (Peterson et al., 1998). These state-sponsored educational programs use public money to finance student education at private schools (Nelson, 2017). In so doing, school vouchers provide private school access to underserved populations (Fleming et al., 2013).

Traditional public school. Traditional public schools are those that are subject to state guidelines, are funded by tax dollars, divided into grade levels, and governed by school districts (Escalante & Slate, 2017).

Assumptions

The current study was based on four major assumptions. First, the researcher assumed that participating parents would respond openly and honestly to all focus group questions. By providing assurances of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, the researcher assumed participants would be forthcoming in the information they shared during the focus groups. The researcher also assumed that all participants possessed the knowledge and experience required to provide the information needed to address the research questions. To ensure all participants possessed the required knowledge and experience, only individuals who met inclusion criteria were included. The researcher assumed that the selected design was well-aligned with the research questions. To ensure this alignment, a number of methodological options were considered before a qualitative case study design was selected; this process is detailed in Chapter 3. It is also assumed that the questions included in the focus group protocol were appropriate, aligned with the study, and free of bias. To ensure the appropriateness of the focus group protocol, questions were reviewed by a panel of subject matter experts in order to establish face validity, as described in Chapter 3.

Limitations

The current research was also subject to two limitations. The main limitation was time. Focus group data were collected for three single points in time. Data collected over a longer span may have provided different insights into parents' experiences and understandings relative to school choice. However, time constraints related to the researcher's academic program precluded longitudinal investigation. The study was also limited to the reported knowledge and experiences of individual participants. The small sample size, which is characteristic of qualitative investigation, prevented the generalization of findings to other populations.

Delimitations

Four major delimiting factors bound the scope of the current study. First, due to geographic constraints, only parents with children enrolled at schools located in the study site school district were included in this study. Parents in other districts, or who were located in entirely different areas of the country, may have significantly different experiences or understandings related to school choice. Another delimitation was the researcher's focus on parents of elementary school students. Parents of older children (such as those in middle or high school) may have different experiences and understandings, as well. The focus on minority parents was another important delimitation. Only parents of minority children were eligible for the study. It was possible – even likely – that White parents may have vastly different experiences and understandings relative to school choice. However, the aim of the current research was to specifically examine school choice among parents of minority students, as this represented a significant gap in the existing scholarship.

The researcher's theoretical framework presented another delimitation. Although the concept of school choice could be interpreted through a number of different lenses, the researcher opted for three distinct theories, which allowed for a more holistic examination of the study phenomenon. The selection of study method and design also presented delimiting factors that must be acknowledged.

Significance

The current research had the potential for four significant social implications. As previously mentioned, a significant negative consequence of poor academic performance among minority students is the high rate of dropout among racial minority students. High school dropout is associated with a number of poor health outcomes and increased criminality (Oreopoulos &

Salvanes, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2014), and is highest among poor and minority students (Maynard et al., 2015). In addition, dropout also has wide-scale economic consequences. For example, over the course of an individual's lifetime, dropout costs society nearly a quarter of a million dollars in lost tax contributions, per dropout (Chapman et al., 2011; Maynard et al., 2015). Dropout is also associated with increased reliance on public welfare and increased risk for drug addiction, suicide, assault, and drug possession (Maynard et al., 2015).

Minority students learn more and are less likely to drop out when they attend private and charter schools (West, 2016). Thus, the exercise of school choice by parents of minority students may be a powerful tool for improving academic performance and reducing dropout rates among minority students. By examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to higher quality education, which may lead to improved rates of graduation.

Summary

The problem of the current research was the persistent academic underperformance of minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). Research indicated that minority students learn more and are more likely to graduate when they attend private and charter schools (West, 2016). Charter schools and vouchers for private education improve access to school choice among minority students; however, it is unclear whether minority parents are aware of the school choice tools available to them. By examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to higher quality education, via school choice.

This chapter served as an introduction to the current qualitative investigation. This study followed a multiple case study design to examine parents' (a) awareness of school choice tools,

(b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. Participants included 15 parents who met the following eligibility criteria: (a) over the age of 18 years, (b) a racial minority, and (c) the parent of an elementary school student currently enrolled in a private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district. Data were collected via three focus groups. A thematic analysis of focus group transcripts was performed, and results of the investigation are presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. The following chapter contains a review of the related literature. Chapter 3 contains details of the study's method and design.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Minority students consistently underperform in school (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013), contributing to high dropout rates among these students (Balfanz et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Maynard et al., 2015). School choice may be a valuable tool for improving performance among minority students, but it has been a topic of contention. Critics of school choice argue that it propagates segregation and racism (Levin, 2018), while proponents claim it provides historically underprivileged students with access to higher quality schools (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018).

Charter schools and vouchers for private education improve access to school choice among minority students; however, it is unclear what minority parents know about school choice and the options available to them. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice.

Review of the Literature

This chapter serves to review the existing research on school choice. The review of related scholarship presented in this chapter is essential to understanding the current research and the gap that was addressed by this investigation. The chapter closes with a deeper examination of the theoretical framework and its application to this investigation. Next, the researcher presents a discussion of the academic achievement gap and interventions that have been implemented to

address it. School choice research is discussed, including associated benefits, criticisms, and outcomes. Tools for school choice and factors that affect it are also presented.

Theoretical Foundation

The framework for this study was based on three theories: bounded rationality (Simon, 1957), the economic theory of school choice (Betts, 2005), and critical race theory (Delgado, 1995). Each of these theories and their application to this investigation is discussed as follows.

Bounded Rationality

According to Simon's (1957) bounded rationality, individuals make decisions based on cognitive limitations and the information available to them. Instead of viewing decision-making as a completely rational process, bounded rationality acknowledges that the rationality of any decision is always bound by the information available to an individual, as well as his or her capacity to process that information. Simon's theory suggests that parents' school choice decisions will vary depending on the information available to them, as well as their abilities to understand and navigate that information. Because minority and low-income parents often have access to less information about schools, bounded rationality may help explain potential inequities in school choice programs. The current research involved an examination of what minority parents knew and understood about school choice; the lens of bounded rationality was helpful for explaining shortcomings or misinformation in parents' knowledge.

Bounded rationality has been used to examine parent behaviors in school choice research. For example, Bell (2009) used bounded rationality to examine school choice decisions made by parents from a variety of social classes and found parents' school choice decisions were limited by income, access to information, transportation, and how available resources were used to choose schools. Ben-Porath also (2009) discussed the school choice debate through the lens of

bounded rationality, arguing that limited access to information can significantly impair parents' school choice decisions. The theory has also been used to explore choices and decision-making in other contexts. For example, Zenko et al. (2016) explored exercise-related behaviors using bounded rationality and found that the bounded nature of human rationality can influence exercise-related judgements and decisions. Tor (2019) employed the theory to explore consumer decision-making, challenging assumptions that consumer demands are reflective of consumers' rational beliefs. The current study contributed to this theory by examining bounded rationality within the context of school choice, among minority parents.

Economic Theory of School Choice

Betts' (2005) economic theory of school choice argues that school choice actually has the potential to improve educational quality while reducing the achievement gap. Although public school choice is limited to families' residential decisions, choices to attend public charters and private schools (via voucher programs) may even the economic playing field and provide minority students with access to higher quality education. In addition, by increasing the competition among schools to attract students, school choice may force schools to improve in a number of ways. Betts argued that when markets are composed of large numbers of buyers (students) and sellers (schools), a condition of perfect competition may emerge. If there are enough schools to choose from, and if parents actually possess the power to determine which schools their children will attend, parents are likely select the schools that best fit the needs and interests of their children (Betts, 2005). Of course, this supposition relates to bounded rationality in that parents' understandings and knowledge of what is best for their children may be limited by their access to information, such as understandings of developmental processes or the emotional needs of children and adolescents. Schools will have to improve to meet the demands

of the buyers (students), or risk losing them. The loss of students, regardless of the school setting (traditional public, public charter, or private) can have severe financial consequences for schools. Essentially, Betts argued that educational equality can be improved through the creation of a competitive market, achieved via school choice.

The economic theory of school choice could influence the school choice decisions of low-income and minority parents who desire to send their children to the best available schools. If schools are forced to compete with one another to attract students, economic theory suggests that such competition could raise the standards for schools and result in improved educational opportunities for students from diverse demographic backgrounds.

The economic theory of school choice has been used by a number of school choice researchers to both defend and criticize school choice. For example, Farmer et al. (2019) used economic theory to criticize school choice, explaining that it leads to financial inadequacies and school closures that disproportionately affect low-income neighborhoods. Goldring and Cravens (2006) used the theory to discuss how market competition behind charter schools related to teachers' pedagogical skills, concluding that core components of curriculum instruction, and organizational conditions were essential to positive student outcomes. DeAngelis and Erickson (2018) used economic and market theories to review the success and efficacy of school choice programs and used available research to develop recommendations for policy changes. The current study contributed to this theory by examining how it may apply to the school choice decision-making process of minority parents.

Critical Race Theory

The final theory used for this framework was critical race theory (CRT; Delgado, 1995). CRT is based on the notion that racism is a deeply entrenched and normalized part of our culture.

CRT argues that equality cannot be truly achieved with the slow, incremental changes that have occurred in recent decades; rather, addressing racism requires large, sweeping changes. CRT purports that racism is deeply engrained in American life – the effects of which inevitably spill over into the educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016).

Although opponents argue that school choice can perpetuate racism and segregation, (Swanson, 2017) supporters claim that school choice actually broadens the educational opportunities and resources available to low-income and minority students (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). The lens of CRT allowed for an examination of what minority parents understood about school choice and the options available to them. Some scholars argue that minority and low-income parents have access to less information about school choice or may not possess the skills needed to research schools and make enrollment decisions for their children. Such lack of information or limitations in the ability to utilize information may relate to lower levels of education or socioeconomic status. If this is so, then the ability of school choice to overcome educational inequities that face low-income and minority children may be questioned.

CRT has been employed in school choice research. Nelson (2017) used the lens to explore school choice and desegregation policies, arguing that school choice may actually propagate segregation. Rector-Aranda (2016) criticized policies for equitable education using CRT, arguing that racial inequalities are preserved in school choice policies. Thompson Dorsey and Roulhac (2019) analyzed school choice policies in North Carolina through CRT, reporting that school choice policies promoted educational inequities and fostered White privilege.

Academic Achievement Gap

Disparities in academic achievement often exist between certain groups; these disparities are referred to as the academic achievement gap (Nielsen, 2013). The achievement gap can occur

along the lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or gender (Webb & Thomas, 2015), and is particularly pervasive between low-income and minority children, and higher-income White children (Reardon, 2013; Wang et al., 2014). Educational disparities, which have been present for decades, are one of the greatest causes of inequality in the United States (Peterson et al., 2016), as they foster long-term socioeconomic inequities for disadvantaged groups.

The academic achievement gap is evident in a number of ways. Disaggregated data from standardized test scores illustrate the persistent performance gap between (a) Whites and Asians, and (b) Blacks and Hispanics (Horsford, 2017). Minority students are underrepresented in advanced classes, but they are overrepresented in remedial classes (Pitre, 2014). On common measures of academic success, including grades, test scores, high school graduation, and college enrollment, low-income minority students are outperformed by White students (Morris & Perry, 2016; Rogers, Maxwell, & Robinson, 2018).

The achievement gap is usually considered an issue of inequality, as low-income and minority students often have access to fewer resources, learning opportunities, and high-quality teachers (Nielsen, 2013). Unaddressed, the achievement gap widens over time, making it critical to recognize and address in the early grades. Upon entering fourth grade, low-income minority students are an average of 2 years behind their White peers in reading and math; by the end of high school, they are 4 years behind (Ford, 2011). Concerns about the academic achievement gap and failing schools have prompted a number of educational reform efforts, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top (Mayes & Hines, 2014). Despite attempts to close the gap, it not only remains persistent, but in many cases, it has also broadened (Reardon, 2011). Current evidence indicates that addressing the achievement gap will require significant changes in how minority and low-income students are taught and the resources they are provided with (Nielsen,

2013). Creating effective interventions to address the needs of these learners and provide them with access to high-quality education is essential to establishing more equity in education. School choice has emerged as an intervention that proponents argue may help establish more equity in education by providing historically underprivileged students with opportunities to attend higher-quality schools. School choice is discussed in detail, later in this chapter.

Interventions to Reduce the Achievement Gap

In recent decades, a number of interventions have been established to address the academic achievement gap – many of which were prompted by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB brought forth a series of accountability measures designed to improve the quality of schools and teachers, following the logic that better schools and teachers would produce better academic outcomes among students. The main accountability measures implemented in the wake of NCLB included high-stakes testing, school grades, and teacher performance evaluations. High-stakes testing was most salient to the current study, as it directly affects students – and has had unintended consequences of broadening the achievement gap (Heilig, Brewer, & Pedraza, 2018). High-stakes testing are not typically required in private schools.

High-Stakes Testing

Under NCLB, a number of accountability measures were enacted with the aim of reducing the achievement gap and improving students' academic outcomes. Public schools were required to conduct high stakes testing to assess student outcomes and provide measures by which the efficacy of schools and teachers could be assessed. The theory behind high-stakes testing was that "schools and students held accountable to these measures would automatically

increase their educational output as educators tried harder, schools adopted more effective methods, and students learned more" (Heilig et al., 2018, p. 2).

However, the overemphasis on high-stakes testing has backfired in a number of ways, as explained by Heilig et al. (2018):

1. Exit exam failure prevented high school graduation, which disproportionately affected minority and low-income students.
2. Test-driven accountability led to the mass firing of teachers, especially those of color.
3. Schools that did not adequately raise student scores fast enough risked being shut down or privatized.
4. High stakes testing slowed the growth of student achievement, likely because it forced schools and teachers to *teach to the test* in order to prevent punitive measures associated with failure to demonstrate adequate yearly progress.

High-stakes testing has also resulted in a narrowing of the public-school curriculum. Over the course of a public K-12 education, the average student will take 112 standardized tests. Because of the volume of testing and the emphasis placed on it, public school teachers often spend approximately 16 hours per week preparing students for standardized tests (Helilg et al., 2018). Minority and low-income students typically underperform on high-stakes tests, widening the achievement gap when such tests are used to determine if a student will be allowed to progress to the next grade or graduate from high school. In short, high-stakes testing has had negative effects on the educational system, and those effects disproportionately impact low-income and minority students.

School Choice

High-stakes testing is common in public schools, widening the achievement gap. Parental awareness of options to choose schools where testing is not required may provide more underprivileged students with opportunities to leave the public school system. School choice is another intervention that has emerged to address the achievement gap, as well as the problem of failing and underperforming schools. School choice describes programs that provide parents with a number of tools to help them choose the schools their children attend, rather than accepting default assignments to public schools based on residence (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). As explained by DeAngelis and Wolf (2019), "Private school choice programs are government initiatives that directly or indirectly provide financial support that allows parents to enroll their child in a private school of choice" (p. 2). Through vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or education savings accounts, low-income or disabled children may access private schools (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2018).

Despite criticism regarding school choice, programs across the United States are flourishing. According to EdChoice (2019), there are currently 56 private school choice programs in the country, which serve over 482,000 students. Between 2005 and 2015, enrollment in private school choice programs increased by 285,606 students (Ortega, 2017). School choice has attracted increased attention in recent years due to changes in educational politics. In 2017, President Trump called for an expansion of private school choice by increasing federally funded access to private schools by $20 billion, providing private school access to 11 million children living in poverty (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2018). Consequently, the body of research on school choice is growing.

School Choice Research

Types of School Choice

To begin the discussion on school choice research, it is essential to first describe the different types of school choice, including charter, private, and traditional public-school choice. Importantly, the current research did not focus on any single type of school choice. Rather, the aim was to more broadly understand minority parents' understandings of all types of school choice and the tools by which school choice options and resources may be accessed. A brief description of differences between the three types of schools is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Types of Schools

Type of School	Characteristics	School Choice Tools Available
Public	Schools that are subject to state guidelines, are funded by tax dollars, divided into grade levels, and governed by school districts	Relocation Requesting admission to school outside of zone (transportation not provided)
Charter	Nonprofit K-12 educational institutions that operate around curricular themes or philosophies, are provided with budgetary autonomy, and are funded by the state	Lottery
Private	School that is not supported by public funds, provides classroom construction for one or more grade levels, and each class is staffed by one or more teachers.	Government-funded vouchers Lotteries Tax credit scholarships

Traditional public. Traditional public schools are those that are subject to state guidelines, funded by tax dollars, divided into grade levels, and governed by school districts (Escalante & Slate, 2017). School choice strategies for traditional public schools can include moving to a specific neighborhood in order to attend a desired public school (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016), or requesting to enroll a child in a school outside of their public-school zone. Some critics of private school choice argue that public school choice is a better option for addressing the academic achievement gap that plagues minority and low-income children. Others, however, explain that transportation and other resource limitations often make it difficult for underprivileged students to attend schools outside of their zone, for which bussing is not available (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014).

Charter. Public charter schools are nonprofit K-12 educational institutions that operate around curricular themes or philosophies, are provided with budgetary autonomy, and are funded by the state (Walters, 2018). Charter schools must follow the same accountability mandates of public schools, but do not receive the same amount of funding provided to traditional public schools (Escalante & Slate, 2017). Charters tend to provide students with fewer benefits (such as extracurricular activities and school transportation) and are unlikely to have many of the programs offered by traditional public schools. Charter schools tend to have younger teachers from non-traditional teaching backgrounds (Escalante & Slate, 2017). Enrolling in a charter school requires applying; when available seats do not meet demands, enrollment is determined by lottery.

Private. A private school is one that is not supported by public funds, provides classroom instruction for one or more grade levels, and each class is staffed by one or more teachers (Broughman & Swaim, 2016). As previously mentioned, private school choice usually involves

the use of government-funded vouchers to provide underprivileged students with access to private schools. Private schools that choose to participate in voucher programs are usually subject to state standardized assessments, financial audits, and accreditation requirements (DeAngelis, 2019). The oversight that private schools must agree to when participating in voucher programs is designed to ensure tax dollars are spent responsibly and that participating schools engage in fair and equitable practices (DeAngelis, 2019). That is, schools participating in school choice programs cannot demonstrate any discriminatory practices or preferential treatment, when it comes to enrollment.

Although regulations are designed to improve the quality of school choice programs, they may undermine schools' innovation and improvement (McShane, 2018), and force private schools to mirror the curriculum and testing practices of public schools (DeAngelis & Burke, 2017). DeAngelis and Burke (2017) reported that voucher programs can lead to the demographic homogenization of private schools. Further, because of regulations, successful, high-quality private schools are less likely to participate in voucher programs (DeAngelis, 2019). For example, DeAngelis, Burke, and Wolf (2019) found that private schools were 29% less likely to participate in school choice programs when participation would subject their students to standardized testing. In other words, private schools would often opt out of eligibility for school choice programs if it meant their students would have to participate in high stakes testing. In an analysis of private school voucher programs in D.C., Indiana, and Louisiana, Sude et al. (2017) found that voucher program participation was lower among private schools with (a) higher enrollment, (b) higher tuition, and (c) higher quality scores. Findings from these studies suggest that lower-quality private schools may be more likely to participate in school choice programs,

which may undermine the potential of school choice to offer high-quality education to underprivileged students.

Proponents of School Choice

In order to examine research on school choice tools, outcomes, and factors that influence it, it is important to first review arguments surrounding the value of school choice. The controversy of school choice has ignited lively debates among proponents and critics. In the following sections, research from both sides of the school choice debate is highlighted.

A number of arguments have been forwarded in support of school choice. Advocates largely call upon Betts' (2005) economic theory of school choice, arguing that choice generates school competition for students, forcing school leaders to improve the quality of education and programs in order to increase enrollment (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). This market competition theory suggests that if families have the ability to choose the schools they send their children to, they will naturally select institutions they perceive to be the best. As a result, enrollment at higher-performing schools will increase while enrollment at lower-performing schools decreases. In order to secure the enrollment needed to stay open, lower-performing schools are forced to improve in quality or they will naturally fail and disappear from the market (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). As DeAngelis and Erickson (2018) explained, "When markets function in an open system, competitive pressures lead to quality improvement" (p. 250). Similarly, Betts argued that when the supply of schools is adequate, and when parents possess the power to determine which schools their children will attend, parents are likely select the schools that best fit the needs and interests of their children, thereby forcing low-performing schools to improve or close. (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). The market argument is based on the economic concept of supply and demand, which can benefit consumers (Merritt et al., 2018).

Another way that proponents argue school choice can lead to improved student outcomes is by improving the match between students and schools. Because students have different interests, abilities, and learning styles, school choice may allow learners to attend schools that are better aligned with their needs. DeAngelis and Erickson (2018) suggested that the definition of school quality may vary by student because of each learner's unique needs. What is considered quality for one student may not be important for another. For example, quality education for a high-performing student may mean access to AP and gifted courses, while quality for an underachieving student may mean access to tutoring and remedial courses. Thus, "If the definition of quality is unique to each individual, we could say that school selection itself—the student-school match – is the definition of quality" (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018, p. 251).

Supporters also believe that school choice programs foster diversity, in opposition to the cream-skimming and segregation arguments of school choice opponents. Advocates believe that choice programs provide impoverished families in racially segregated communities with opportunities to send their children to schools that are more racially diverse (Kotok et al., 2015). These programs also can improve school diversity by providing economically disadvantaged families with opportunities to participate in the educational marketplace and send their children to more affluent schools (Kotok et al., 2015).

Admittedly, findings from research regarding the effects of school choice on the racial composition of schools are conflicting. For example, Swanson (2017) found that private school choice either improved racial integration or had no effect on it. In contrast, Renzuli and Eans (2005) found that as a school district became more racially diverse, enrollment increased at surrounding, predominantly White charter schools. To help conceptualize conflicting findings

regarding the effects of school choice on diversity, it is helpful to recall Simon's (1975) Theory of Bounded Rationality. This theory states that the decisions individuals make are based on their access to information and their abilities to process and utilize that information. A number of factors can influence decision-making in these ways, including personal histories and experiences with race and diversity. Thus, it is not the presence of school choice, alone, that influences diversity in districts. Rather, diversity is influenced by the availability of school choice options alongside the individual knowledge, experiences, access to information, and abilities to utilize information.

Minority support. Support for school choice is expected to continue to grow as (a) the U.S. population becomes more racially diverse, and (b) support for school choice grows among minorities (Ortega, 2017). Beck Research found that almost three-quarters of surveyed Latin Americans and African Americans supported school choice (American Federation for Children, 2017). Support for school choice is evident in charter school enrollment across the country; in charter schools, Latin Americans comprise 30% of student enrollment, as compared to 25% of enrollment in public schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

Minority support for school choice may result from poor public-school support provided to minorities. Evidence exists that the public school system may not provide adequate support to minority students. As Ortega (2017) explained, "Ineffective educators, violence, and a lack of academic standards are contributing to the increased demand for greater choice among minority families" (p. 70). Further, research indicates that minority students may be better served at public charters than traditional public schools (Stanford University, 2017); however, in order for school choice options to be considered viable alternatives for parents of minority students, those parents and students must have access to information about school choice, and the ability to utilize that

information to make school choice decisions, per bounded rationality (Simon, 1957). West (2016) reported that attending private or charter schools of choice offered the most benefits for urban minority students. Most surveyed minority families express satisfaction with their children's private or charter school enrollment (Ortega, 2017); but again, those expressions of satisfaction are limited to the information that individuals possess. This limitation aligns with bounded rationality theory, which provided a cornerstone for the current research; that is, information is only useful to the degree to which it is accessed and able to be utilized.

Critics

Just as proponents offer a number of arguments in support of school choice, critics have been quick to point out its potential shortcomings. Criticism of school choice has been widespread, with many fearing that school choice will result in the privatization of U.S. education (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2018). School choice opponents also argue that the educational market theory espoused by school choice proponents is based on faulty assumptions. For example, for the market to operate fairly and foster equity, all potential participants in school choice programs must (a) know about the school choice options available to them, and (b) possess the ability to process complex information in order to make school choice decisions for their children (Kotok et al., 2015). This argument is in direct alignment with Simon's (1957) Theory of Bounded Rationality. Because research indicates that low-income and minority parents have access to less information about school choice, the idea of school choice equity based on market theory is somewhat inaccurate. In this way, bounded rationality could provide a valuable lens for understanding many of the arguments made against school choice.

Other opponents of school choice have voiced concerns that the programs may undermine the civic values of citizens. DeAngelis and Wolf (2018) studied how participation in

the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program affected adult voting behavior. A comparison of voting behaviors between adult students who did not participate in the program with those that did reveal voucher students were not more likely to vote in the 2012 or 2016 elections. In another study of voucher programs in 14 states, Merritt et al. (2018) found that state governments often fail to mandate civics curriculum among schools participating in school choice programs. Followers of Mann (1855) and Dewey (1916) believe that public schools with a standardized curriculum are required to teach all children how to become citizens of a democracy (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2018). Without the uniform values taught through a public school system, some believe that the function of a democratic society will be undermined (Molnar, 2013).

Outcomes of School Choice

A challenge with the existing research on school choice is that findings are mixed, and methodologies vary. Some researchers have reported positive effects of school choice on a number of outcomes, while others have reported the opposite. Research on the outcomes of school choice programs is presented, as follows, as these factors may influence parent decision-making regarding school choice.

Positive outcomes of school choice. A number of studies indicate that school choice offers many benefits to students (DeAngelis, 2018; DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018; Shakeel, Anderson, & Wolf, 2016; Wolf et al., 2013). For example, Shakeel et al. (2016) found that private school choice was associated with improved math and reading scores. Wolf et al. (2013) reported a school choice voucher program was associated with a 21% increase in the likelihood of graduating high school. DeAngelis (2018) found that participation in a private school choice program was associated with increased effort and higher scores on the Programmer for

International Student Assessment (PISA). Swanson (2017) reported that school choice was associated with increased racial diversity and integration.

Reduced criminal behavior. Persistence through voucher programs has been associated with reduced criminal activity (DeAngelis, 2017; DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). DeAngelis and Wolf (2019) found that participation in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program in eighth or ninth grade was correlated with significant reductions in criminality and paternity suits. Dobbie and Fryer (2015) and Demming (2011) reported that winning a school choice lottery was associated with a significant reduction in student's future incarceration and criminality. The effects of school choice on criminal behavior appear to be long-term; DeAngelis and Wolf (2016) reported that private school choice was correlated with reduced criminal behavior into early adulthood.

Other non-cognitive benefits. While the outcomes of school choice programs are typically measured with metrics such as standardized test scores, it appears that school choice offers a number of other non-cognitive benefits that may benefit students. As Beuermann and Jackson (2018) explained, private schools may provide students with a number of benefits unrelated to tests, such as improved social skills (Jackson, 2018), reduced criminality and teen parenthood (Deming, 2011; Beurmann et al., 2018), and improved social networks (Schmutte, 2015). Private school choice may improve students' tolerance of others who are different from them (Campbell, 2002) and boost volunteer activity, charitable work, and political participation (Betinger & Slonim, 2006; Fleming, 2014; Fleming, Mitchell, & McNally, 2014). As DeAngelis and Wolf (2019) stated, "standardized test scores do not fully capture society's goals for education" (p. 3). West (2016) argued that the benefits of private school attendance are strongest in outcomes besides test scores, such as college enrollment rates. Improving non-cognitive skills,

such as character-building, can lead to higher lifetime earnings, better employment, and improved quality of life (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2019) – none of which are captured by standardized tests.

Although there are many benefits to school choice that cannot be measured via standardized academic metrics, it is possible that many parents do not consider these non-cognitive benefits because the dominant narrative about school quality is centered on quantifiable academic outcomes. Thus, in order for non-cognitive benefits to be utilized in school choice decisions, the Theory of Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1957) stipulates that individuals must have access to information about these additional benefits. Unless parents intentionally seek out this information, which is not part of the mainstreamed messages about school quality and choice, it is unlikely to influence their school choice decisions.

Issues with Measuring Outcomes

It is important to acknowledge that the benefits of school choice may not be accurately measured by standardized tests, providing a misleading narrative about outcomes associated with school choice. As previously mentioned, these limited narratives may affect school choice decisions via bounded rationality. Because of differences in students' individual needs and the way schools match with different learners, it is possible for school quality to improve without changes in metrics such as standardized test scores (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). Most of the research on school choice uses metrics such as test scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates to assess program effectiveness (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). One problem with relying on a metric such as test scores is that it is limited to measuring students' cognitive abilities (Egalite, Mills, & Greene, 2014), and schools should endeavor to also improve

students' non-cognitive skills, such as communication, to produce well-rounded students who possess multiple types of intelligence.

Improvements to students' non-cognitive skills can result in greater educational attainment, persistence, conscientiousness, earnings, and quality of life (Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2010); however, if parents do not understand these benefits, they are unlikely to integrate these factors into their school choice decisions. Further, schools that demonstrate high quality as measured by standardized test scores may be more likely to teach to the test, while failing to nurture important non-cognitive skills (Chingos et al., 2019) In this way, relying solely on academic metrics to measure the quality of schools is misleading, and may influence parents' school choice decisions, according to the Theory of Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1957).

In addition, many related studies fail to capture the long-term effects of school choice on test scores because positive effects often take a couple years to appear (Mills & Wolf, 2017b; Waddington & Berends, 2017). Further, the immediate effects of school choice on metrics such as test scores do not accurately predict long-term outcomes, such as college enrollment or high school graduation (DeAngelis, 2018; Hitt, McShane, & Wolf, 2018). Several researchers have reported correlations between school choice, high school graduation, and college enrollment (Chingos & Kuehn, 2017; Wolf, Witte, & Kisida, 2018), which should be considered in conjunction with other short-term outcomes, such as performance on standardized tests.

Another issue is that few studies on school choice are experimental, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn about the effectiveness of associated programs. From a bounded rationality perspective, this means that the suggestions made by school choice researchers may be limited by the information available to them through methodologically limited investigations. Of the 20 experimental investigations on the effects of private school choice in the United States,

only two revealed negative outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Walters, 2018; Dynarski, Rui, Webber, & Gutmann, 2017). Differences in methodology have created significant conflicts in school choice research. For example, Shakeel et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis of 19 experimental school choice programs revealed null to small positive effects of these programs on students' academic outcomes. As reported by Wolf and Egalite (2018), achievement outcomes related to school choice are typically more positive in experimental studies on reading achievement; however, outcomes tend to be negative for quasi-experimental studies on math achievement. While researchers found negative math and reading outcomes associated with the Louisiana Scholarship Program (Mills & Wolf, 2017a; Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018), those effects were null after 3 years (Mills & Wolf, 2017b).

Neutral or negative. While some research suggests school choice may be beneficial in a variety of ways, there is also evidence that it has neutral or negative effects on academic outcomes. A number of researchers have reported school choice had no significant effects on student test scores (Ajayi, 2015; Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2014; Lucas & Mbiti, 2014). Other researchers, such as Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2018) found that school choice was associated with declines in test scores.

According to Beuermann and Jackson (2018), evidence suggesting neutral or negative effects of school choice may be misleading. Many such studies focus on way school choice affects marginalized or underprivileged students. As Beuermann and Jackson explained, "If the marginal applicant benefits less from preferred schools than the average applicant, it could explain why parents, on average, may have strong preferences for schools with small impacts on the marginal applicant" (p. 1). Essentially, existing research that indicates neutral or negative

correlations between school choice and academic outcomes may not paint the full picture if they are only focusing on students who are typically part of low-performing groups.

Egalite and Stallings (2018) reported an interesting trend in the outcome research on school choice voucher programs. Older studies tend to reveal null or small positive effects of voucher programs on student outcomes (Barnard, Frangakis, Jin, & Rubin, 2003; Greene, 2001; Howell, Wolf, Campbell, & Peterson, 2002; Krueger & Zhu, 2004), while more recent studies indicate negative effects on academic outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018; Dynarski et al., 2017; Mills & Wolf, 2017). It is likely that researchers will continue to study the outcomes of school choice, but continued inconsistencies in methodologies and outcomes measures will make it difficult to determine the true academic effects of these programs.

School Choice Tools

Parents have a variety of tools available to them to foster school choice, but they may not be aware of or make use of all of these tools. Public school choice tools can include moving to a specific neighborhood in order to attend a desired public school, or enrolling in public charter schools. Parents may also apply to send their child to a traditional public school outside of their zone, if they are able to arrange alternative transportation for the student. Charter schools are free to attend, but still require an application. When charter schools are overprescribed, enrollment is determined by lottery. Private school choice involves enrolling students in private schools, either through self-financing, government vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, or education savings accounts (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). The three most common tools are discussed below.

Lotteries

Lotteries are a common school choice tool used to distribute resources when demand exceeds supply. Lotteries may be used to award vouchers for private school choice, determine

enrollment for charter schools, or to place students into preferred public schools outside of their assigned zone. The aim of lotteries is to ensure resources are distributed fairly. Without lotteries, "the influence of schools on their admission process outcomes – either in the form of enrollment on a first come, first served basis, or through the application of interviews to parents or entry tests to students – would lead to a segregated system" (Parrao, Gutierrez, & O'Mara-Eves, 2018, p. 1). Lotteries are thought to help ensure equity under school choice policies by removing the potential for discrimination or cherry picking of students during the admission process. To ensure lottery systems provide assistance to the students who most need it (i.e., economically underprivileged or marginalized groups), they are often employed in combination with eligibility criteria such as household income (Sutton Trust, 2007).

Lotteries are a strategy to fairly distribute resources and school seats to students, but they are far from perfect. As Chabrier, Cohodes, and Oreopoulos (2016) explained, lotteries can "lead to heartbreaking scenes of disappointment" (p. 58) for students who are not selected and must return to undesirable schools. Lottery systems for school choice are criticized because they inevitably result in disappointment for some students (Chabrier et al., 2016); however, one cannot criticize the use of lotteries without acknowledging that they are only required because school choice demands are so high. From a bounded rationality perspective (Simon, 1957), it is also important to note that lotteries can only be maximally fair if all individuals who are eligible to participate are aware that lotteries are available and understand how to participate in them. It was possible that parents in the current study underutilized tools such as lotteries because they did not know these tools were available to them.

Voucher Programs

Voucher programs are another school choice tool, which provides families with funding to send their children to the schools of their choice (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). The use of vouchers has increased significantly in recent years. Between 2009 and 2015, the number of U.S. students using school vouchers grew by 130% (Alliance for School Choice, 2015). Nearly 184,000 students currently use vouchers to attend private schools (EdChoice, 2018).

Voucher programs have been the source of much debate between those who believe education is a private consumer good, and those who believe it is a public good (Merritt et al., 2018). Despite criticisms, research indicates that voucher programs can positively impact students in several ways. For example, DeAngelis and Wolf (2016) found that students who attended private schools through voucher programs were significantly less likely to commit crimes. Research also indicates that participation in voucher programs is associated with increases in rates of high school graduation and college enrollment (Wolf et al., 2013). Chingos et al. (2019) examined the ways two voucher programs in Milwaukee and Washington, DC affected student outcomes. High school students who were enrolled in the Milwaukee voucher program were more likely to enroll in college than students in the Milwaukee public school system. Students enrolled in the DC voucher program were no more likely to attend or graduate from college that peers who were not in the program; however, they were 21% more likely to graduate from high school (Wolf et al., 2013).

Foreman (2017) examined the academic outcomes associated with voucher programs, pointing out an important shortcoming in the current evidence: only four studies have been conducted to assess the effects of voucher programs on educational attainment – one in New York, two in Milwaukee, and one in Washington, D.C. Findings from the four studies were

mixed; the New York study revealed no effects on college enrollment or graduation, but the Milwaukee studies revealed a positive effect on both outcomes. For high school graduation rates, the Milwaukee and D.C. studies indicated positive effects.

Critics tend to bury these benefits under research that shows voucher programs are associated with no significant improvements to student test scores (Carnoy, 2017), thereby driving the narrative that test scores are the only way to measure the benefits of school choice programs and policies. Overall, research indicates effects of voucher programs on student outcomes are inconclusive, as not enough evidence exists (Foreman, 2017). Research may be inconclusive because many studies fail to acknowledge the role of bounded rationality in the use of voucher programs. In order for parents to access vouchers, they must not only know that these tools exist, but they must also understand the processes for applying for them. It is possible that parents with less education may struggle to go through the process to apply for vouchers, or limitations in personal experiences may preclude parents from even seeking out information on school choice tools, such as vouchers. More research is needed to truly understand informational factors that influence parents' school choice decisions.

Tax Credit Scholarships

The third common tool for school choice is tax credit scholarships. These scholarships are created through donations to nonprofits that provide scholarships to private schools; in return, taxpayers receive full or partial tax credits for those donations. Corporations can also donate to these scholarships to receive corporate tax credits (Chingo & Kuehn, 2017). Tax credit scholarship programs use public funds to pay for private education, instead of directing the government to provide funding through traditional vouchers (Davies, 2019). Tax credit

scholarships differ from the individual and personal tax credits and deductions available to parents for their children's private school expenses (Lueken, 2016).

Currently, 18 states in the country offer tax credit scholarships (EdChoice, n.d.). Analysis of the fiscal impacts of tax credit scholarships reveal significant savings. Lueken (2016) assessed the fiscal effects of 10 tax credit scholarship programs throughout the country. Alone, those 10 programs generated savings between $1.7 billion and $3.4 billion – a value of $1650 to $3000 per scholarship.

Researchers have also examined the effects of tax credit scholarships on students' academic outcomes. Chingo and Kuehn (2017) investigated the effects of the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) scholarship program on enrollment and graduation from postsecondary institutes. The researchers compared a group of 10,000 students who participated in the FTC scholarship program with a group of 10,000 students who did not. Results indicated FTC scholarship participation had a significant positive effect, increasing enrollment rates by 15%. Among students who participated in the program for a longer period (at least 4 years), enrollment in postsecondary institutes increased by 43%. However, results for degree persistence seemed to negate these positive effects. For students who began the FTC scholarship program in elementary school, an 8% increase in attainment of 2-year degrees was observed; for those who did not begin the program until high school, no significant increase in degree attainment occurred.

Like the entire topic of school choice, opponents have examined tax scholarship programs through critical lenses; but much of this criticism is theoretical in nature. For example, Davies (2019) examined the structure of the Kansas tax credit scholarship program and warned about the potentially negative consequences of this program and others like it. Davies claimed that the Kansas program diminishes the democracy of public education and suggested that it may

primarily benefit more economically advantaged students at the expense of disadvantaged students. The scholar also suggested the Kansas program *may* primarily benefit certain social groups, thereby fostering greater inequalities. The problem with Davies' analysis is that it is based on theoretical suppositions, rather than any concrete evidence of program effects. Similarly, much of the criticism of school choice, in general, seems to be theoretical in nature. More research is needed to understand the *actual* effects of school choice and associated tools, such as tax credit scholarship programs.

Factors that Affect School Choice

The school choice decisions made by parents often involve a complex process and a number of factors (Altenhofen et al., 2016). For example, parents may make decisions based on interrelated resources such as access to transportation and childcare (Goyette, 2014). Parents who participate in school choice programs often conduct careful research before making decisions (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Kisida & Wolf, 2010). For example, they may access information by conducting school visits, talking with teachers, or conducting online research (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Because school choice parents often conduct research on schools of interest, they are more likely to have correct information about schools. Findings from Kisida and Wolf's (2010) study on school choice revealed that parents who used private school vouchers were 12% more likely to possess accurate information about selected schools than parents who did not use vouchers. Importantly, access to information policies and options is essential to the equity of school choice. As Kotok et al. (2015) pointed out, and in accordance with the economic theory of school choice, for the educational marketplace to operate in the way school choice proponents support, all potential program participants must be aware of school choice options and have the ability to process information about those options.

In addition to the information gathered by parents about school choice, a number of other factors may influence school choice decisions. Some of the most common factors include parental education, a family's socioeconomic status, social networks, school quality, parents' religiosity, a school's proximity to the home, the availability of extracurriculars, and the racial composition of a school. These factors are discussed, as follows.

Parental Education

The education level of parents may influence how likely they are to participate in school choice programs, as well as how they make school choice decisions. For example, Howell and Peterson (2006) found that applicants of school voucher programs were more likely to have mothers who graduated from college. Similarly, Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer (1995) found that parents who used private school vouchers were more likely to have higher levels of education than those who did not use them. It is likely that the possible influence of parental education on school choice is due to bounded rationality. More educated parents may not only have better access to information about school choice and available tools, but they may also possess cognitive skills to process and utilize that information more effectively than less educated parents.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status can also significantly affect parents' school choice decisions. For example, a student's geographic location can affect public school choice; families of lower socioeconomic status are less likely to possess the resources to move to neighborhoods zoned for more desirable and effective schools (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Low-income parents often lack the luxury of making housing decisions based on their children's school enrollment. Among low-income parents who are aware of schooling options and desire to utilize available resources, such

as tuition vouchers, poor access to transportation may limit the schooling options available to them (Laureau, 2014). Students who attend private or charter schools, or public schools outside of their assigned zone, rarely have access to bussing. Thus, parents of these children must arrange alternative transportation to and from school, and such arrangements are typically more limited for low-income families.

In addition, parents of lower socioeconomic status are likely to have less access to information about available schooling options (Lareau, 2014), an effect that must be considered through the lens of bounded rationality (Simon, 1957). As later mentioned, parents typically obtain information about schools from their social networks; the social networks of low-income parents may provide inferior information to that of social networks for more advantaged parents (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Socioeconomic disparities in school choice decisions are evident across the world, and can result in grouping of students by race and family income level – thus creating less school diversity and integration (Wilson & Bridge, 2019).

Social Networks

Parents are likely to access social networks to gather information to make school choice decisions (Wolf & Stewart, 2012). Wolf and Stewart (2012) found that parents talked with other parents in their circles to research schools. Similarly, Kelly and Scafidi (2013) found that parents often accessed information from their social networks before making school choice decisions.

Potential inequities. Differences in socioeconomic status can influence the information that parents have access to within their social networks. In addition, parents of low socioeconomic status may lack strong research skills and may struggle to understand the different schooling options available to them (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). In contrast, parents who are more socioeconomically advantaged are more likely to have access

to high-quality information within their social networks (Lareau, 2014). The disparities in information available in the social networks of parents of different socioeconomic status may foster inequities in school choice (Lareau, 2014). These inequities are an important reason why the Theory of Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1957) was integrated into the framework for the current research. The fairness of school choice programs and tools cannot be considered without also considering bounded rationality.

School Quality

The academic quality of a school is a primary factor that parents consider when making school choice decisions (Stewart & Wolf, 2014). However, the ways that parents define academic quality can vary greatly, making it difficult to understand how it factors into school choice decisions (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Academic quality may be determined by test scores, teacher quality, school curriculum, or school environment (Erickson, 2017), and the factors parents use to assess quality may differ from the traditional metrics that are used. For example, while the majority of parents in Stein et al.'s (2010) study reported that academic quality was the main criteria they used to make school choice decisions, most of the parents who used school choice tools ended up switching their students to lower quality schools, as measured by test scores. Of the parents who switched their children to charter schools, 40% of the selected schools did not demonstrate adequate progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB; Stein et al., 2010). In addition, the ways parents determine quality may be bounded by the information they have available to them, as well as their abilities to understand and utilize that information. Thus, although academic quality of a school may strongly influence parents' school choice decisions, significant differences exist in the ways academic quality is determined.

Religiosity

Religion is a factor that leads many parents to send their children to private schools. Howell (2004) evaluated New York City's School Choice Scholarships Foundation and found that parents who applied for vouchers and kept their children in school choice programs were more likely to regularly attend church. Pelz and Dulk (2018) reported that private school choice decisions were associated with the religious devoutness of parents.

Non-religious parents may also prefer religious schools because of the associated secular benefits. Exposure to religious schools may create educational environments that foster values, conscientiousness, and responsibility (Wolf et al., 2019). Reichard (2012) reported no statistically significant relationship between religious affiliation and enrollment in private religious schools. However, the researcher did find that religious parents often preferred religious schools, even if the religion of the school differed from their own. Parents' religiosity, not their religious affiliation, influenced enrollment in private religious schools (Reichard, 2012).

School Proximity to Home

Private and charter schools rarely provide bussing to and from schools, so a school's proximity to a student's home may be an important factor considered by parents when making school choice decision (Laureau, 2014). Harris and Larsen (2014) found that a school's distance from home was as important as school quality in parents' school choice decisions. In a study on school choice among parents in Los Angeles, He and Guiliano (2018) found that proximity from home was one of the two most important indicators used by parents when selecting schools.

As previously mentioned, school proximity to home may also be a bigger consideration among low-income families, which are more likely to have access to fewer transportation options (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Phillips, Hausman, and Larsen (2012) reported that transportation

issues created school choice barriers for low-income families. Families with more resources are more able to select desirable schools that are farther from home (He & Guiliano, 2018; Phillips et al., 2012), emphasizing the importance of examining school choice from a socioeconomic lens; the economic theory of school choice and critical race theory provided that lens for the current investigation.

Availability of Extracurricular Programs

Extracurricular programs can also drive parents' school choice decisions. For example, DeAngelis (2017) reported that parents who participated in school choice were far more likely to be satisfied with the extracurricular offerings at their selected schools. Charter schools are unlikely to have athletic programs, so parents who want their children to play sports may be less likely to select one of these schools. Private schools, on the other hand, may use sports scholarships to entice parents of athletically gifted children (Johnson, Lower, Scott, & Manwell, 2018).

Racial Composition of School

A school's racial composition is another factor that parents may consider when selecting schools. Some parents seek schools with more diversity, while others seek schools that are predominantly White (Altenhofen et al., 2016). A parent's race may influence how heavily racial composition weighs into school choice decisions. In Egalite et al.'s (2016) study on parents' school choice decisions, the researchers reported that Asians were slightly more likely than Whites to select private schools for their children. In contrast, 93% of low-income African-American parents were likely to select traditional public schools (Egalite et al., 2016).

Case Studies

Researchers have examined the effects of specific school choice programs, such as the Louisiana Scholarship Program, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. An examination of existing case studies is helpful for understanding the potential outcomes of school choice, in practice. The following sections highlight research conducted in four popular school choice programs.

Louisiana Scholarship Program

The Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP) is a school choice program that provides underprivileged students with vouchers to attend private schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Low-income students who are attending low-performing schools are eligible to apply for vouchers. To be eligible for vouchers, students must come from families earning less than 250% of the federal poverty level (Louisiana Department of Education, 2015b). In addition, applicants must have previously attended a low-performing school, as graded by the Louisiana School Performance Score rating system. Requirements for the LSP are somewhat complicated; through the lens of bounded rationality, eligibility requirements may undermine access to the program among eligible families. When the number of applications for vouchers exceeds available slots, a random lottery is used (Louisiana Department of Education, 2015a). Private schools can become eligible for receiving vouchers via application with the Louisiana Department of Education. Students can also use LSP vouchers to attend highly-rated public schools, but few public schools participate in the program (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018).

The LSP has been criticized because research indicates that LSP vouchers are associated with significant reductions in student achievement (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Students on vouchers have been 24% to 50% more likely to receive failing scores in core subjects

(Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2018) conducted an investigation to better understand why program vouchers were associated with such large declines in academic performance. The researchers found evidence that private schools participating in the LSP may be lower quality schools. For example, schools in the voucher program charged lower tuition than schools that did not participate; the lowest scores in math were found among students who attended school with the lowest tuition. Typically, private schools participating in the program spent far less per pupil than public schools did (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014a).

Also of interest, schools that participated in the LSP program typically demonstrated dramatic declines in enrollment prior to joining; this suggests that lower-performing schools may join the program to keep enrollment high enough to stay open. Although test-based accountability rules are employed to identify and remove low-performing schools from the voucher program, they do not appear to be effectively eliminating schools that demonstrate poor student outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2018). Importantly, it is unlikely that all parents who apply to the LSP are privy to these research findings. Rather, they may pursue the program out of faulty assumptions that private schools must be of higher quality than the area's public schools. Thus, the decisions they make about applying may be bounded by the information available to them, as well as their personal assumptions and experiences.

Despite the negative academic outcomes associated with the LSP program, vouchers remain in high demand. Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2018) hypothesized this demand may be because parents assume private school education is superior, or they value school characteristics (such as religiosity) over academic quality. Indeed, a growing body of research indicates that parents' school choice preferences are not based on test scores (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2014; Ajayi, 2015;

Pop-Eleches & Urquiola, 2013). Voucher demand may also be the result of misinformation about participating schools.

Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) is a government-run school choice program that was launched in 1990 to test the use of private school vouchers for low-income students. The MPCP is unique in that students are required to first enroll in a participating private school, and then apply for tuition assistance through the state. To qualify for the MPCP, students must live in Milwaukee and come from a family with an income level at or below 175% of the federal poverty level (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2016). Researchers have examined outcomes associated with the MPCP. For example, DeAngelis and Wolf (2016) found that persistence through the voucher program was associated with a reduction in criminal behaviors. Wolf et al. (2013) found that high school graduation and college enrollment were both positively affected by participation in the MPCP.

North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program

The North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program was launched in 2014 to provide underprivileged K-12 students with opportunities to attend private schools. The vouchers are state-funded and worth up to $4200. Egalite and Stallings (2018) conducted an in-depth analysis of academic outcomes associated with the NCOSP and found significant positive effects. The first-year effects of the program were increases by .36 standard deviations in math, and .44 standard deviations in language. The 2-year impact was even more significant for language, with improvements of .52 standard deviations. Missing from the research on the NCOSP is information on any potential non-cognitive benefits of the program, which may limit information available to both parents and researchers on its effectiveness.

D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was created by Congress to provide tuition vouchers to help low-income children attend private schools (Dynarski, Rui, Webber, Gutmann, & Bachman, 2017). Participating schools must comply with requirements of nondiscriminatory admissions, program evaluation, and fiscal responsibility (Dynarski et al., 2017). The program awards vouchers to students based on lottery; this allows for an experimental evaluation of the program effects because students who are awarded vouchers are randomly selected. Dynarski et al. (2017) conducted an analysis of the academic outcomes related to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. After one year, participation in the program had a significantly negative effect on mathematics achievement. Reading scores for voucher users were lower than those who did not participate in the program, but the difference was not significant. In addition, the researchers reported that the program did not significantly affect parents or students' satisfaction with schools (Dynarski et al., 2017). However, it is important to acknowledge that satisfaction with the program is likely to be limited by parents' and students' access to information about the program and their individual perspectives and expectations about the program's effects. In addition, no mention of non-cognitive benefits of this program has been made, which is another limitation that may limit decisions made surrounding applications to this program.

Summary

The body of research on school choice is growing as the topic continues to spark debate among educational leaders, politicians, and scholars. Most of the research on school choice is focused on the educational outcomes of school choice programs, typically assessed using metrics such as standardized test scores and graduation rates. However, many of the benefits of school choice are non-cognitive, and are therefore not considered in much of the research.

Regarding parents' decisions about school choice, researchers have examined how a number of factors may weigh in. Some of the most common factors include parental education, a family's socioeconomic status, social networks, school quality, parents' religiosity, a school's proximity to the home, the availability of extracurriculars, and the racial composition of a school. In terms of how decisions are made, parents often access information by conducting school visits, talking with teachers, gathering information from their social networks, or conducting online research. Importantly, the equity of school choice requires that parents have equal access to available information, which is not always the case. Low-income and minority parents often have access to less information about school choice, so the idea of school choice equity based on market theory is somewhat inaccurate.

Although some research has been conducted on how parents make school choice decisions, it appears that research focusing on school choice decisions among minority parents is lacking. Further, differences in information about school choice among minority parents of children in different types of schools is lacking. In order for school choice to be examined, it is critical to integrate the theory of Bounded Rationality (Simon, 1957). According to this theory, individuals make decisions based on cognitive limitations and the information available to them. Instead of viewing decision-making as a completely rational process, bounded rationality acknowledges that the rationality of any decision is always bound by the information available to an individual, as well as his or her capacity to process that information. Because minority and low-income parents often have access to less information about schools, bounded rationality may help explain potential inequities in school choice programs.

The purpose of this multiple case study is to explore understandings of school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b)

private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. The following chapter provides methodological details for this study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The problem of this study was persistent academic underperformance among minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). A consequence of this underperformance is a high rate of dropout among minorities (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Maynard et al., 2015). Although research indicates minority students learn better and are more likely to graduate when they attend private and charter schools (West, 2016), school choice has historically been examined with contention, as it is often associated with propagation of segregation and racism (Levin, 2018). Today, charter schools and vouchers for private education improve access to school choice among minority students; however, it was unclear what minority parents know about school choice and whether they are aware of the school choice tools available to them. By examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to high quality education.

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents' (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. The study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do racial minority parents of elementary school students define school choice?

RQ2. What are racial minority parents' social and economic perceptions of school choice?

RQ3. Within the framework of bounded rationality, how do racial minority parents access information, learn, and make decisions regarding school choice?

This chapter provides details of the study's methodology. The chapter begins with a discussion of the method and design selected, followed by a description of the study sample and population. Instrumentation and data collection procedures are carefully detailed. Procedures for data analysis are described, followed by steps that were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of study data. Ethical considerations are also outlined. The chapter closes with a brief summary.

Method and Design

The nature of this investigation was qualitative and it followed a multiple case study design. Qualitative research is useful for exploring phenomena in natural contexts, which allows researchers to interpret and make sense of phenomena according to the meanings assigned by the individuals who experience those phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Through a qualitative lens, researchers can explore phenomena in their natural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The phenomenon that served as the focus of the proposed study was school choice, as experienced and perceived by parents of minority students. Importantly, the aim of this study was to understand minority parents' understandings and decisions relative to school choice; such understanding could only be obtained by talking with parents, directly. Through qualitative focus groups, the chosen method allowed the researcher to gather rich, in-depth understandings of parents' (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice.

While quantitative investigations result in findings that possess statistical certainty and may be generalized to larger populations (Khan, 2014), these types of studies primarily aim at assessing relationships between predetermined study variables. In addition, findings from

quantitative investigations lack the depth that is available through qualitative inquiry. Quantitative research aligns with a positivist tradition that aims to obtain objective information, rather than individuals' experiences and interpretations (Sale et al., 2002). In contrast, qualitative researchers embrace the subjective and view truth as inextricably linked with perception. Samples in quantitative investigations tend to be significantly larger than those in qualitative investigations, as quantitative research typically aims to produce generalizable results (Rahman, 2016). Because the aim of this investigation was not to assess the statistical significance of relationships between predetermined variables, or generalize results to larger populations, a qualitative method was selected.

The design selected for this research was multiple case study. Case study designs are appropriate for broad examinations of topics that leverage more than one data source (Yin, 2003). Case study is broadly defined as "an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unite, which is aimed to generalize over several units" (Gustafsson, 2017). By utilizing multiple data sources, case study researchers can develop holistic and dynamic understandings of study phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Researchers can choose from single or multiple case study designs. According to Yin (2003), a multiple case study design is appropriate when researchers aim to analyze data within and across different situations or contexts. Because data from multiple case studies can be triangulated across the cases, data are often strong and reliable (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

In the current study, a multiple case study design allowed the researcher to examine the research phenomenon within three different contexts, based on the type of schools attended by students of participating parents. For case studies, researchers must define the boundaries of cases (Yin, 2014). In the current study, cases were defined by the three types of schools from

which parents will be sampled: (a) private schools, (b) public charter schools, and (c) traditional public schools. A multiple case study design improved the trustworthiness of findings, as it allowed the researcher to triangulate findings across the three cases. In this way, the researcher was able to examine similarities and differences that existed in parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice and associated tools and resources.

Sample and Population

The population of the current research consisted of parents with students attending schools in the study site school district. The study site district was located in Brooklyn, New York, and was selected because of its large number of schools, diversity, and proximity to the researcher. The district was home to six private elementary schools, 13 charter elementary schools, and 12 public elementary schools. The total number of parents with children attending the three study site schools was approximately 1,636. This number was based on the assumption that every child at each study site school had two parents. There were 200 students enrolled at the participating private school, 359 at the participating public, and 259 at the participating charter.

A sample of five parents was selected for each of the three cases (private, charter, and public), creating a total sample of 15 parents. The sample size was selected based on guidelines from qualitative researchers, which suggested saturation was likely to be reached with a sample of this size in cases study research (Guest et al., 2017). It is difficult to determine a priori sample size in qualitative research because qualitative samples are typically adaptive to a study's needs, and are based on saturation (Saunders et al., 2017). The achievement of saturation indicates a qualitative sample size is adequate (Saunders et al., 2017). Saturation is indicated when collected

data become redundant, and the integration of additional data produces no novel findings (Sandelowski, 2008). In the current study, data were collected until saturation was evident.

Participants were purposively selected to participate based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) over the age of 18 years, (b) be a racial minority, and (c) be the parent of an elementary school student currently enrolled in one of the selected private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district. Parents for each case were sampled from a single elementary school within the study site school district. That is, the sample consisted of parents from one elementary private school, one elementary charter school, and one elementary public school. These schools were chosen based on the researcher's access.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to collect study data was a focus group protocol (Appendix A). The protocol consisted of open-ended, semi structured questions designed to gather information on minority parents' decision-making process regarding school choice. According to Moustakas (1994), open-ended questions improve the depth and credibility of qualitative research, and can also help reduce bias among researchers. Focus groups were selected over individual interviews, as interaction and conversation among participating parents may have provided richer data than if participants were individually interviewed.

The protocol consisted of 11 questions. The focus group protocol was developed to ensure questions were consistently asked to participants of each focus group. Face validity of the focus group protocol was achieved via review of two experts in the field of education. The intent of this review is to ensure the questions were not written in a way that was confusing, misleading, or unintentionally introduces biased. Each expert was emailed a copy of the protocol

and asked to provide any suggestions for changes to the researcher, via email. No changes were made to the focus group protocol as a result of the expert review.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited through the Parent Coordinator at each of the three selected schools. The Parent Coordinator was provided with the study invitation and asked to distribute it to parents of elementary age minority students. The study invitation (Appendix C) contained details of the study, inclusion criteria, participation requirements, and the researcher's contact information. Interested parents were invited to contact the researcher to join the study and schedule a time to participate in one of the three focus groups. Recruitment continued until at least 5 parents volunteered to represent each of the three cases (private, charter, and public). When individuals contacted the researcher to join the study, their eligibility was confirmed via a discussion over email or phone. Eligible individuals were emailed a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix B) and asked to sign and return to the researcher, via email. Only individuals who provided informed consent prior to the focus group were sent a link to access the group.

Data were collected via a single focus group for each of the three cases, for a total of three focus groups. In compliance with social distancing mandates, focus groups were conducted virtually, via Zoom meeting. Focus groups were audio and video-recorded through Zoom. The researcher expected each focus group to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. As previously mentioned, the researcher followed a focus group protocol (Appendix A) that was validated via review from subject matter experts. Individuals who volunteered for the study, demonstrated eligibility, and returned signed consent forms to the researcher were scheduled for one of the three focus groups. Each participant was emailed a link to access the Zoom meeting for their

focus group one day prior to the event. A reminder email was sent the morning of the focus group.

Prior to each focus group, the researcher signed into Zoom and waited for all participants to log-in. After all participants logged into the meeting, the researcher made sure everyone's camera and microphone were working. Next, the researcher welcomed everyone and gave all participants the opportunity to introduce themselves. After introductions were complete, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions they had. After all questions were answered, participants were notified that the recording was about to begin, and then the first question of the focus group protocol would be asked. As moderator of the focus group, the researcher encouraged everyone to participate and asked probing questions as needed to foster meaningful and in-depth responses. At the conclusion of the focus group, all participants were thanked for their time. The recording ended and the meeting was closed.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings from each of the three focus groups were professionally transcribed and then thematically analyzed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures for data analysis. The data analysis plan consisted of the following six steps: (a) repeatedly review transcripts, (b) develop codes, (c) develop codes into themes/subthemes, (d) review codes against the research questions and framework, (e) define themes, and (f) write up study results. The first step of Braun and Clarke's analysis process involved immersion in the data. To become closely familiar with the study data, the researcher read each focus group transcript three times. This process of transcript review allowed the researcher to become acquainted with the data.

Next, each transcript was coded. The process of coding involved identifying repetition in the study data and assigning a name to the repeated idea, phrase, or sentiment. The researcher coded each of the three transcripts to develop an initial list of codes. Next, a second pass was performed to ensure all codes were identified and properly assigned. For step 3, the researcher organized study codes into themes and subthemes, in alignment with the research question. During this step, any irrelevant codes were discarded. Codes were arranged based on similarities and relationships; in this way, the themes and subthemes organically emerged from codes within the data.

The fifth step of the analysis involved reviewing the themes and subthemes against the study's framework. Themes and subthemes were reorganized as needed to ensure cohesion and theoretical alignment. After the fifth step was performed, a preliminary copy of the analysis was emailed to all study participants to complete member checking. For this process, participants were asked to review the themes and subthemes to ensure they were in alignment with the ideas and sentiments participants intended to convey. Participants were asked to respond to the researcher, via email, to confirm the accuracy of the analysis or provide feedback they believed should be integrated. No changes to the analysis resulted from the member checking process.

For step 6, each theme and subtheme was assigned a succinct definition. The final step of the analysis involved developing a narrative of the results, using examples and quotes from the focus groups, to illustrate the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. The narrative of study results is presented in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

While reliability and validity are used to ensure the rigor of quantitative research, qualitative researchers rely on the components of trustworthiness, including credibility,

dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative findings are trustworthy when they align with the sentiments, ideas, perceptions, and opinions that participants intended to convey to the researcher. In the current study, several strategies were implemented to ensure findings were trustworthy.

Credibility refers to how closely participants' intended sentiments are reflected in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking, a process that involves inviting study participants to review the researcher's preliminary analysis, is a strategy that was used to improve study credibility. Member checking involves participants as co-researchers and helps ensure the researcher has captured the core ideas participants intended to communicate. In addition to member checking, bracketing was another strategy used to improve study credibility. Bracketing describes a process in which the researcher takes time, prior to collecting or analyzing study data, to become aware of their personal biases, ideas, and opinions. This process of awareness helps researchers "bracket out" potential biases that may otherwise influence the data (Moustakas, 1994). In the current study, the researcher employed reflexive journaling to aid with bracketing.

Dependability describes how stable study findings are, over time (Bitsch, 2005). One way to improve the dependability is to keep precise details of all study data and procedures, via an audit trail. In the current study, the dependability of findings was ensured via an audit trail. Transferability refers to how well study findings can be transferred toother contexts (Merriam, 2009). Thick description, via detailed records of all study procedures, can help ensure findings are contextualized. In this study, clear details of all study procedures improved transferability. Finally, confirmability describes how well other researchers can corroborate study findings

(Anney, 2014). Reflexive journaling and an audit trail were used to establish confirmability. In addition, triangulation across the three cases helped improve confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Several procedures were implemented to ensure the protection and fair treatment of all study participants. First, before any participants were recruited for this study, approval was obtained from the Long Island University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In addition, the researcher completed the CITI training on ethical research procedures. The Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979) principles of respect, justice, and beneficence were also followed. The safety and well-being of all participants were ensured through the maintenance of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent. First, the identities of all parents were protected via pseudonym. All study site schools, as well as the study site school district, were also assigned pseudonyms. No potentially identifying information, remarks, or details from the focus groups were published.

All participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study if they did not wish to continue. No participant was forced to answer focus group questions they were uncomfortable addressing. The questions asked during the focus group were not sensitive in nature, and were not expected to create any discomfort for participants. Risks associated with participation did not extend beyond mild discomfort associated with sitting to attend a focus group. No incentives were provided to participants, and the researcher did not recruit any parents with whom she had current or past personal or professional relationships.

The informed consent procedure was designed to provide participants with autonomy and ensure they understood and agreed to participation requirements. Consent was obtained via completed informed consent forms (Appendix B). Prior to focus groups, each participant was

emailed a copy of the informed consent form, which contained information regarding the purpose of the investigation, participation requirements, risks, benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation. The informed consent form also contained the researcher's contact information, in the event individuals had any study-related questions that were not addressed in the consent form. Participants were asked to return signed consent forms to the researcher at least 2 days before the scheduled focus groups.

Care was taken to ensure the protection of all study data. All data were collected and stored in digital format. Informed consent forms were collected via email, and audio recordings of focus groups were transcribed into digital textual format. Consent forms, digital audio files, and transcriptions were all stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher was the only individual who had access to study data. A link that matched participants' pseudonyms to their actual names on the informed consent forms was not kept. All data will be securely stored for a period of 3 years, as required by Long Island University; after that point, all study data will be permanently erased from the researcher's computer.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore understandings of school choice among parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents' (a) awareness of school choice tools, which included what they knew about available tools, such as lotteries and voucher programs; (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, which included any positive and negative experiences parents had when exercising school choice; and (c) overall perceptions of school choice, which included parents' attitudes and perceptions toward school choice, based on their experiences and the information that had been

provided to them. This qualitative investigation followed a multiple case study design. Cases were defined by the three types of schools from which parents were sampled: (a) private schools, (b) public charter schools, and (c) traditional public schools.

A sample of 5 parents was selected for each of the three cases (private, charter, and public), creating a total sample of 15 parents. Data were collected via three focus groups (one for each case). Focus groups were audio-recorded, so data could be transcribed for analysis. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. Findings from this study revealed ways to improve minority students' access to high quality education.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Introduction

The problem examined for this research was persistent academic underperformance among minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). Research indicates minority students learn more and are more likely to graduate when they attend private and charter schools (West, 2016). However, school choice has historically been examined with contention, as it is often associated with the propagation of segregation and racism (Levin, 2018). While charter schools and vouchers for private education improve access to school choice among minority students, it is unclear what minority parents know about school choice, whether they are aware of the school choice tools available to them, and how they make decisions regarding school choice. To help conceptualize conflicting findings regarding school choice, it is helpful to recall Simon's (1957) Theory of Bounded Rationality. This theory states that the decisions individuals make are based on their access to information and their abilities to process and utilize that information. A number of factors can influence decision-making in these ways, including personal histories and experiences with race and diversity.

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. The study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do racial minority parents of elementary school students define school choice?

RQ2. What are racial minority parents' social and economic perceptions of school choice?

RQ3. Within the framework of bounded rationality, how do racial minority parents' access information, learn, and make decisions regarding school choice?

This chapter provides a discussion of the analysis and a presentation of findings. A description of the sample is followed by details of the analysis procedures. Results of the analysis are presented thematically, in alignment with the research questions. The chapter closes with a brief summary.

Description of the Sample

The population for this research consisted of parents with students attending schools in the study site school district of Brooklyn, New York. Data were collected via three focus groups, which consisted of parents with children attending private, charter, and public elementary schools. Each group consisted of five parents who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) over the age of 18 years, (b) a racial minority, and (c) parent of an elementary school student currently enrolled in one of the selected private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district. In Table 2, participants for each case are identified.

Table 2

Participants in Each Case

Case	Participant	Case	Participant	Case	Participant
Private	Angela	Charter	Shanelle	Public	Kris
	Trish		Tonya		Monica
	Michaela		Michael		Jennifer
	Miranda		Miranda		Sharon
	Nancy		Ashley		Ronald

Detailed Analysis

Data were collected via a single focus group for each of the three cases, for a total of three focus groups. Focus groups were conducted virtually, via Zoom meetings. Focus groups were audio and video-recorded through Zoom and lasted an average of 60 minutes. Focus groups were performed in April, 2022. This process went smoothly and no technical issues were encountered. Participants logged into the Zoom meeting and brief introductions took place. The focus group then began, with questions being read directly from the protocol. As appropriate, probing questions were asked to encourage more dialogue and responses. After the questions were all answered, participants were thanked for their time and the Zoom meeting ended.

After all focus groups were conducted, audio for each recording was professionally transcribed using an online service that provided highly accurate transcripts. Recordings from Zoom were downloaded and then sent to the transcription service. Transcripts were completed within one week. After receiving the transcripts, the researcher reviewed them closely for accuracy. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures, which consisted of the following six steps: (a) repeatedly review transcripts, (b) develop codes, (c) develop codes into themes/subthemes, (d) review codes against the research questions and framework, (e) define themes, and (f) write up study results.

The first step of analysis involved immersion in the data. To become familiar with the study data, the researcher read each focus group transcript three times. This process of transcript review allowed the researcher to become acquainted with the data and begin to recognize patterns and repetition in the data. Next, coding began, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding involved identifying repetition in the study data and assigning names to repeated ideas, phrases, or sentiments. The researcher performed open coding for each of the three transcripts to

develop an initial list of codes. Open coding involved searching for patterns and repetition in the data, which may emerge in the form of words, phrases, ideas, utterances, attitudes, etc. When repetition was identified, it was assigned a code that was then added to the codebook. After open coding had been performed on all transcripts, a second pass was done to ensure all codes were identified and properly assigned. A total of 72 codes emerged, and 621 occurrences of codes were noted in the data. The frequency of each code is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Code Frequency

Code	*f*	Code	*f*
student safety	24	missed opportunity	7
funding	23	uniforms	7
close proximity	22	school choice definition	7
financial limitations	22	counselors	6
distribute information to parents	21	lotteries	5
information not available	21	extracurricular are factor	5
proactive in obtaining information	21	diversity is factor	5
subpar schools	19	special services	5
network	19	gifted	5
unfamiliar with school choice	18	school mission/vision	5
Zoning	16	technology	5
personal beliefs/faith	15	financial sacrifice	5
barriers for minorities	15	transportation limits choices	5
financial assistance	15	change address	4
academics are factor	13	information inaccessible	4
communication is factor	13	CEC meetings	4
public is bad	13	ask questions	4
unaware of choices	12	private is better	4
information sharing	12	can’t get in	3
funding limits choices	11	care is factor	3
networking with parents	11	bullying	3
mislead about school	11	reach out to parents	3
voucher	10	SLT meetings	3
applications	9	learn about schools	3
default attendance	9	school choice policies are detrimental	3
not enough choice	9	working parents	3
unaware of financial assistance	9	confusing process	3
class size is factor	8	school choice is good	3

sense of belonging	8	individual attention	3
parents not informed	8	parents don't know where to get information	2
word of mouth	8	PTA	2
creates opportunity	8	outsiders	2
choose school	8	church	2
got in	7	not eligible for financial aid	2
public has more services	7	take money from public	2
social media	7	public is better	2

As depicted above, the most frequently occurring codes included *student safety* (*n* = 24), *funding* (*n* = 23), *close proximity* (*n* = 22), *financial limitations* (*n* = 22), and *distribute information to parents* (*n* = 21). The least frequent codes, with two occurrences each, included *parents don't know where to get information, PTA, outsiders, church, not eligible for financial aid, take money from public,* and *public is better*.

For the third step, focused coding was performed, with study codes organized into themes and subthemes, in alignment with the research questions. Codes were arranged based on similarities and relationships, which emerged as themes and subthemes (Table 4). A total of seven themes were identified, including *definitions of school choice provided by minority parents, social perceptions of school choice, economic perceptions of school choice are negative, strategies used to access information, factors in parents' school choice decisions, school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable,* and *parents should be informed of school choice.* Eleven subthemes emerged, including *parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students, tools available for school choice, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, networking, proactive research, financial factors, student-level factors, parent preference factors,* and *school-level factors*. The association between themes, subthemes, and codes is depicted in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

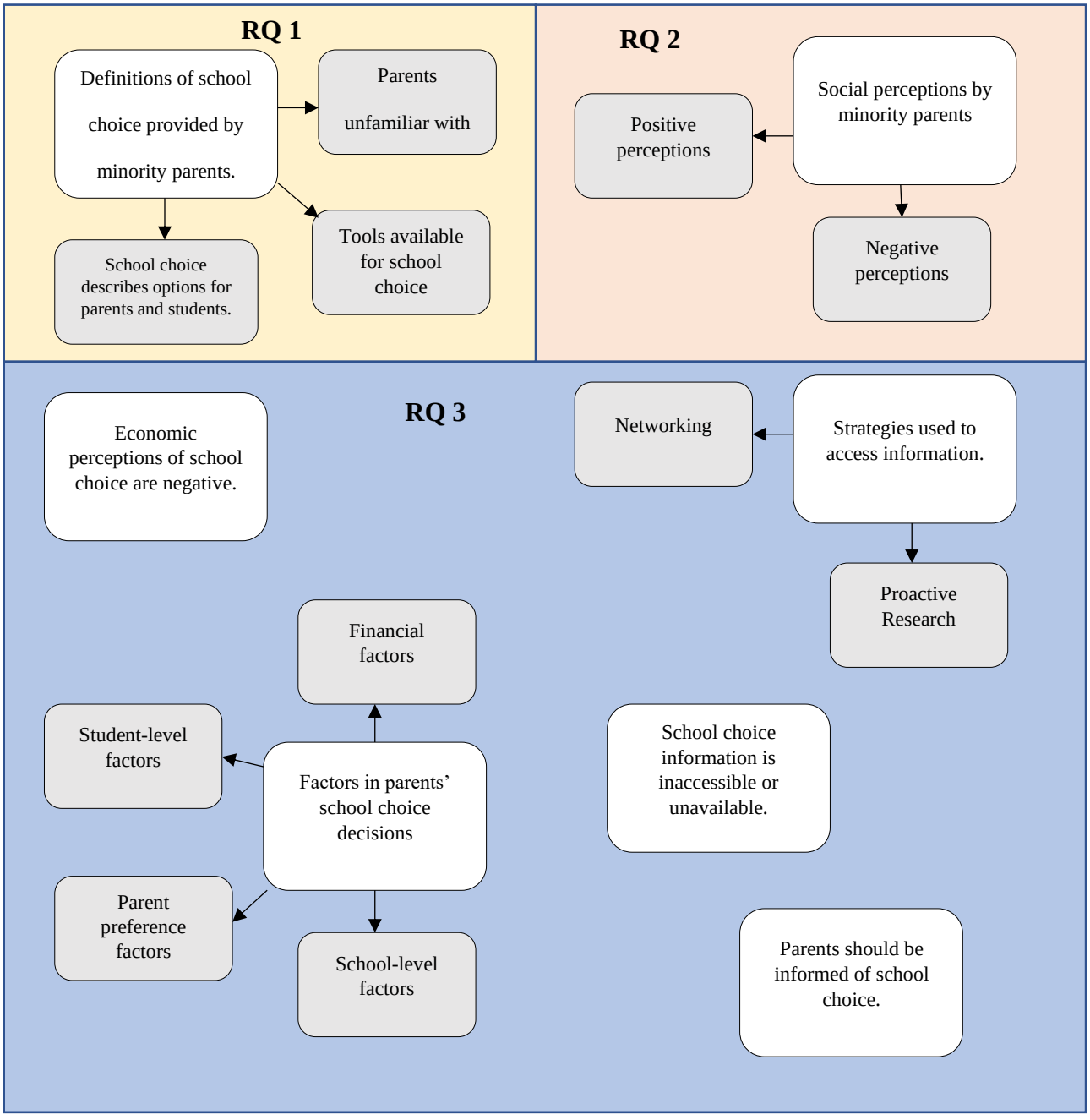
Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Definitions of school choice provided by minority parents (RQ1)	Parents unfamiliar with school choice	-unfamiliar with school choice -unaware of choices
	School choice describes options for parents and students	-school choice definition -choose school
	Tools available for school choice	-lotteries -applications -voucher -zoning -change address -financial assistance
Social perceptions of school choice (RQ2)	Positive perceptions	-creates opportunity -school choice is good -got in
	Negative perceptions	-take money from public -school choice policies are detrimental -barriers for minorities -not enough choice -can't get in
Economic perceptions of school choice are negative (RQ2)		-unaware of financial assistance -funding limits choices
Strategies used to access information (RQ3)	Networking	-networking with parents -network -word of mouth -information sharing -church
	Proactive research	-CEC meetings -PTA meetings -SLT meetings -proactive in obtaining information -ask questions -learn about schools
Factors in parents' school choice decisions (RQ3)	Financial factors	-financial limitations -financial sacrifice -not eligible for financial aid -funding -working parents
	Student-level factors	-student safety -bullying -sense of belonging -outsiders -individual attention -care is factor
	Parent preference factors	-personal beliefs/faith -school mission/vision
	School-level factors	-extracurriculars are factor -academics are factor

		-class size is factor -communication is factor -diversity is factor -public has more services -gifted -close proximity -transportation limits choices -subpar schools -uniforms -public is better -public is bad -private is better
School choice information is inaccessible or unavailable (RQ3)		-parents not informed -parents don't know where to get information -information not available -information inaccessible -mislead about school -missed opportunity
Parents should be informed of school choice (RQ3)		-distribute information to parents -reach out to parents -technology -social media -confusing process -counselors

Themes and subthemes were examined to ensure alignment with the study's framework and research questions. Preliminary findings were provided to all participants for review. Participants were asked to review the themes and subthemes to ensure findings captured the ideas and sentiments participants intended to convey. Feedback from the member checking process resulted in no changes to the analysis. A visual representation of the themes, subthemes, and alignment with research questions is provided in Figure 1. The final step of the analysis involved developing a narrative of the results, presented in the following section.

Figure 1

Thematic Map



Case Comparison

Prior to a discussion of the themes and subthemes to emerge in the study, it is important to note the strong similarities among the cases. It was anticipated there would be differences in knowledge, access to information, and decision-making strategies among parents in the public, charter, and private schools; however, this was not the case. Across the cases, there was a lack of familiarity with the term "school choice," but a vague understanding of the concept. There was a noticeable lack of knowledge about school choice tools available, and much of the information parents did have was incomplete. Overall, the similarities among parents from the three groups revealed school choice were not well understood, and parents across all school types may be lacking information about these tools. Similarly, the ways parents conducted research on schools and made decisions were similar across cases, with participants relying heavily on their social networks, word of mouth, and personal research. Because of the similarities among the cases, results are presented thematically, rather than by case. This thematic presentation allows for a more coherent presentation of the results.

Theme 1: Definitions of school choice provided by minority parents.

The first theme to emerge was in direct alignment with the first research question. This theme focused on the ways minority parents defined and understood school choice. Focus group responses for the question designed to gauge participants' familiarity with school choice revealed mixed levels of understanding. Three subthemes to emerge for this theme included *parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students,* and *tools available for school choice.* Each subtheme is discussed, as follows.

Parents Unfamiliar with School Choice

The first subtheme captured unfamiliarity with school choice, which was reported by several participants. All participants in the charter school focus group explained that prior to participating in the current research, they were unfamiliar with school choice. From the responses, it seemed parents gathered information about charter schools largely from word of mouth, social networks, and charter schools reaching out to them directly to try to enroll their children. As Tonya shared, “I’m completely unaware of school choice.” When asked whether they thought minority parents were aware of school choice, Ashley replied, “I don’t.” She went on to share that even when conducting her own research on Google and the Department of Education website, she found no information about school choice.

Miranda and Michaela of the private school group shared similar sentiments. Michaela admitted, “School choice is a completely new term to me.” This means that despite exercising school choice by choosing to enroll their children in private schools, these to participants were not familiar with the term, “school choice.” Not only was the concept of school choice unfamiliar, but participants were often unaware of schools that were available in their areas. As Trish explained, “There are a lot of times that there are private schools in your area, but you don't know that they exist.” Miranda admitted that she had “never really looked into school choice,” while Michaela shared, “I think a lot of people don't know what school choice entails and that there are options out there.” From the perspective of bounded rationality, findings from this theme were important because they indicated limited understandings of what school choice is. Although participants had some awareness, the term was new to them, which could undermine their ability to access and interpret information about school choice tools and options.

School Choice Describes Options for Parents and Students

Some participants did express a surface level understanding of school choice, describing it as a way to create options for school attendance. Michael shared, “I'm unaware of what school choice is, but if I hear the phrase, I'm going to assume that it's between choosing public, private or charter schools, or Catholic schools.” Miranda followed up with, “I would have to say that, with the assumption of there being a variety to choose from, or what's best for your child.” Tonya assumed school choice had something to do with access and availability of schools, while Angela described it as a strategy created by the government to help parents choose which schools to send their children to. Michaela suggested school choice was “the ability to choose a school.”

Tools Available for School Choice

Although most participants were not familiar with the phrase “school choice,” they did seem to understand it involved ways to provide parents with options regarding where their children were educated. Despite unfamiliarity with the phrase, most participants used terms throughout the focus groups that described tools of school choice, such as lotteries, vouchers, and applications. For example, Michael (charter), Angela (private), and Michaela (private) all described the use of lotteries for charter schools. This was particularly interesting because although these participants were not familiar with the term “school choice,” they used school choice tools, such as lotteries. Monica used an application process to enroll her child in a public school outside of her zone, while Michael had completed applications and lotteries to create as many enrollment options as possible. Participants in the private school group were the only ones to specifically mention the use of vouchers, although none of them had been able to use this tool to help offset tuition expenses for their children because they did not qualify. Financial assistance was discussed more broadly among charter and public school group members,

although participants admitted it was very difficult to qualify for any type of financial aid. Within the public school group, Jennifer, Sharon, and Kris mentioned changing addresses as a strategy to enroll students in a public school outside of one's assigned zone. An awareness of public school zoning was described by participants in all three groups.

Theme 2: Social perceptions of school choice

The second theme to emerge from the data was *social perceptions of school choice*, which aligned with the second research question. For this theme, two types of perceptions were broadly described, categorized as positive and negative. These two categories became subthemes for the second theme, discussed as follows.

Positive Perceptions

Generally, most participants had positive social perceptions of school choice, once the researcher explained what it was, viewing it as a tool that created opportunity for students, especially those who were disadvantaged. When asked if she believed school choice policies were detrimental to minorities, Tonya replied, "I don't think that school choice is detrimental to minorities because I feel like it's provided them opportunities that they may not be able to have access to in other routes." Michael similarly explained school choice provided students with access to schooling options that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Ashley felt school choice was positive in that it provided parents with options and choices regarding where their children were educated. Angela believed school choice "allows for children to attend schools that they may not be able to, if the parents can't financially afford it." Shanelle said options provided through school choice were needed, while Ashley shared that school choice could help parents keep from enrolling their kids at schools where student behavior was a common problem.

When describing their own use of applications or lottery systems, participants who were granted their choices often shared this in positive terms. For example, Monica explained she was "fortunate to get into a district school" that was outside of her zoning. Monica later shared, "Thank God we got in." Ashley described moving her son from a public to a charter school, saying "We got lucky and he got into the charter." Michael positively described how his child was accepted into a charter school through lottery, which then "grandfathered in" the child's younger siblings.

Negative Perceptions

Despite generally positive sentiments toward school choice, some negative social perceptions were also mentioned. Some participants described the difficulty of gaining access to chosen schools, even when using available tools. Others felt that available choices were inadequate. For example, Tonya mentioned there were no private schools near her home. Jennifer shared, "I mean, we have a school choice, but I feel like there aren't enough choices, because a lot of the schools aren't good." Kris shared a similar sentiment, stating: "At the end, it's all public. Even charter schools are public. So our school choice is limited." Ashley felt school choice did not truly provide parents with many options. Angela mentioned concerns that vouchers for private school education took funding away from public schools, while Sharon felt such policies may work against students with very few options, even with school choice tools.

Negative social perceptions of school choice were mostly discussed in terms of barriers for minority students. For many participants, school choice did not seem completely fair for minority students for a number of reasons. For example, Kris felt testing used to determine enrollment eligibility created barriers for minorities. Jennifer believed minority students were disadvantaged because their parents often lacked access to information or social networks needed

to inform them of school choice options and tools. Shanelle echoed this sentiment, sharing she did not believe information regarding school choice was available in Black and Brown communities. Angela believed minority children did not have as much access to school choice tools. Monica and Ashley felt finances created a disadvantage for minority students whose parents could not afford to send them to private schools.

Theme 3: Economic perceptions of school choice are negative

The third theme focused on participants' negative economic perceptions of school choice. Like the second theme, theme 3 was also in alignment with the second research question. Even with tools such as vouchers and tax credits, participants felt available funding limited school choice. If parents did not have money to pay private school tuition or the transportation and resources needed to take them to schools outside of their zones, choices seemed significantly reduced. As Kris explained, "Because we don't control the funding, we don't really have school choice." Jennifer agreed with Kris, adding:

> I mean, this is simple, but something simple as, okay, they can't afford... like they don't have a car. So now they're stuck choosing a school that's a couple blocks away that may not be a good school, but they can't get their kid to any other school.

Ashley, whose son was in a charter school, would have preferred to put him in private school but was unable to because "it was just too expensive." Angela's son went to private school, but because she was not eligible for a tuition voucher, the only way he could attend was if she paid for it. Angela explained, "the actual tuition fees, I get no help. So if I could not afford it, he would not be able to benefit from being in a Catholic school." Trish, who also had a son in private school, agreed: "if you can't afford it, it's not even an option for you. It's not even a choice."

Negative economic perceptions may have been related to participants' lack of awareness of financial assistance available through school choice policies. In addition, participants explained that parents may assume aid is not available, or that they do not qualify for it, and so they do not even seek it out. In reference to financial assistance, Trish shared, "I don't even look at it. Because I just know that I'm not going to be considered, but I just feel like if you can't afford it, then sometimes, people won't even look to it." Michaela said she was completely unaware of assistance available to parents: "I never knew that all of these vouchers or grants or whatever, all this assistance was even available to parents." Similarly, Ashley had never heard of financial assistance available through school choice, explaining, "I'm looking at what's an education savings account? What? Never heard of it. The tax credit, never heard of it." Miranda echoed this notion: "I didn't even know they provided financial aid and those type of things."

Theme 4: Strategies used to access information

The fourth theme to emerge from the investigation was *strategies used to access information*. This theme aligned with the third research question and revealed two main types of strategies: networking and proactive research. Each of these strategy types are discussed as subthemes.

Networking

Networking was the most discussed strategy used by participants to gain information about schools and choice options. As Monica shared, "I feel like we have to…really network and be willing to share [information]." Kris suggested attending community events where parents could network and meet likeminded parents in the community. Monica networked online, through her social media accounts:

> I think since now social media is such a huge platform, I think that being able to have this information ... like I'm a part of this network that every ... there's someone in the network that literally posts the CEC [Community Education Council] meetings for the whole district whenever they happen.

Participants in the public and charter school groups specifically described networking with other parents to gain information about schools. Monica shared how she identified parents with whom to network with and gather information:

> I found those groups of parents that were like super parents in my eyes. And I was like, "So, what's going on? Is there anything I need to know? Like what meetings do I need to be in?" And so that's exactly how I found out about the CEC meetings and [School Leadership Team] SLT meetings.

For Monica, an important part of networking with parents was to intentionally pass along the information she received:

> I feel like we have to ... really network and be willing to share it. Because that email, I sure enough was emailing people like, "oh, let me show you what Simone sent me. Here you go." Like that was how I paid it forward.

Some participants in all three groups mentioned the importance of sharing information about schooling options with other parents. Kris described the importance of sharing information with parents in her network, stating, "Each one teach one." Shanelle similarly relayed, in reference to learning about school choice options, "I want to share it. I want to get to know it. I want to know it and share it, utilize it, and pass it on."

The information Monica had received about school choice was almost exclusively through her social network and word of mouth. When asked how she learned critical

information, Monica replied: “Completely word of mouth. Word of mouth.” In describing difficulties she experienced gathering information about schooling and financial options, Ashley said, “I don't even know how you would know unless it's word of mouth.” Miranda described several criteria that she used to make her school choice decision, but ultimately acquired necessary information to make those decisions through her social network. Miranda said networking and “word of mouth” were particularly important for parents seeking information about private school options. She explained, “I see they advertise more of public schools than they do private schools. Private school's more like a word-of-mouth type of thing.”

Proactive Research

A number of participants also described ways they proactively conducted research to gather information needed to make school choice decisions. Monica went to community education council and parent teacher association meetings, while she and Sharon also referenced school leadership team meetings. Of all the participants, Monica shared the most examples of how she proactively sought out information. Kris also shared the importance of proactive research, describing how she learned about a school’s mission and vision, and interviewed school staff to gather more information. Miranda, who was not aware of financial aid available for students in private school, said she had to seek out information on her own. Speaking of accessing school choice information, Kris shared, “you have to make an effort to kind of find it or either know the right people that will direct you to it.” Tonya mentioned the importance of doing “your own research.”

Ronald explained that parents needed to learn about schools and surrounding neighborhoods and create personal assessments of comfort with individual schools in order to make enrollment decisions. Michael discussed the importance of exploring all schooling options

to make the best decisions about which schools to select. Sharon mentioned the importance of beginning research on schools as early as possible, stating "It's never too early to start." The importance of seeking out information and conducting one's own research was mentioned by half the participants. Sharon explained that because schools provided very little information, "We get what we get from the school, unless you take the steps that you need to take…to gain that information."

Theme 5: Factors in parents' school choice decisions

Theme five was one of the richest themes to emerge from the analysis, focusing on the factors that influenced parents' school choice decisions. Four subthemes emerged to highlight the different types of factors mentioned by parents. These subthemes included *financial factors*, *student-level factors*, *parent preference factors*, and *school-level factors.* Each subtheme is described as follows.

Financial Factors

Some parents from all groups mentioned financial factors in their school choice decision-making processes. Financial limitations and sacrifice were common factors brought up. The code *financial limitations* were one of the most prevalent in the dataset, occurring 22 times. Monica mentioned the expense of private school as something that was not feasible for her, when coupled with other important expenses like saving for a home and retirement. When discussing subpar public schools, Shanelle shared,

> [I'm] not saying all zone schools are horrible, but they've been known to be not so good. Hence the reason why a lot of parents that I've known have moved to a charter school because they're not able to afford a Catholic school or a private school."

Ashley looked into enrolling her son in a Catholic school but said, “It was like paying for college tuition. I couldn't afford it, hence why I sent him to public... I can't afford it.” Michael felt it was unfortunate that finances prevented many students from attending private schools: “It's unfair because there's a lot of talented kids, there's a lot of smart kids, and there's a lot of kids who [would] do well in those systems, but can't afford to be there.”

Parents in the private school group also mentioned financial limitations, both as the sacrifices they had to make to pay for their children’s education, but also in terms of assumptions regarding the affordability of private school. Financial sacrifice was specifically mentioned by two participants. For example, Tonya explained that parents would work multiple jobs to ensure their children received the education and care they wanted for them. Michaela, whose son was in private school, described the sacrifice she and her husband made to ensure her child received a quality education:

> We're not picking out designer clothes and something like that. We're picking a school setting that allows our children to be better educated, prepare for the future, and grow and learn in a safe environment. And the fact that we have to sacrifice so much financially.

When discussing her own upbringing, Angela mentioned the financial sacrifice her parents made to pay for her private school education: “I grew up in East New York in the eighties and the schools were not good. So my parents did everything within their power to make sure that we attended a Catholic school.”

Miranda explained that a lot of parents did not even consider enrolling their children in private schools because of the “stigma of it being expensive or they can’t afford it.” However, she later shared, “I'm in middle class and I make a decent amount in salary and I was still approved for the financial aid.” When discussing financial assistance, Michaela said “You have

be dirt poor to get any type of aid or any assistance." Nancy shared that when parents at her daughter's school failed to pay tuition, the school would withhold report cards: "If you can't afford, I guess, to pay your monthly fee, for this monthly tuition, the principal will not give the child a report card."

Student-level Factors

Student-level factors were also important in parents' school choice decisions. For example, student safety was emphasized by parents across all three groups as a critical factor in their decisions. The most common code across all focus groups was *student safety* (*n* = 24). Kris and Monica mentioned student safety as the most important factors in their decisions. Monica was happy to know her children were "super safe" at school. Michael shared, "I was more worried about my child's safety than anything else." Similarly, Nancy said "safety for me is number one." When discussing safety, Nancy specifically mentioned the importance of knowing her daughter would not be bullied at school: "For me, one of my major factors would be that the school has an anti-bullying policy, so I know that she's going to be safe. And if there's any student caught bullying, they can be suspended or expelled." Michaela explained that even non-religious parents enrolled their children in Catholic schools "because of the safety."

A sense of belonging and ensuring their children fit in was another student-level factor mentioned in parents' decision-making processes. For example, Nancy explained knowing her child would not feel like an outsider because she was a minority was important to her:

> The fact that my daughter goes to Catholic school and there are other kids that look like her is a big deal for me. There are some Catholic schools where you'll have one black child with everybody else's Caucasian. And the fact that she has other kids that looks like her, I believe, that happens to help with her overall development."

Kris echoed the importance of feeling a sense of belonging, in terms of race. She explained that minority students can sometimes feel like outsiders: “Those students don't feel welcome, and they're not able to thrive once they arrive.”

Sharon felt relieved after attending her child’s public school orientation, sharing: “It made us feel way more comfortable with understanding like, okay, he belongs here. We feel like he'll be a good fit here.” For Shanelle, a sense of belonging involved ensuring there were other children of the same age at the school. Shanelle explained, “Age. It was a factor. I wanted him to be around more kids of his age.”

Individual and caring attention was also mentioned by parents. For example, Miranda shared, “I love the fact that, in the morning, the principal stands in front and literally greets everyone by name. To me, that means a lot to me.” Michael mentioned having teachers who “actually show that they care.” Shanelle, who was not happy with the charter school her son was enrolled in, was actively exploring other schooling options because she felt teachers did not care enough at her son’s current school. Shanelle shared, “I want to take him somewhere else where I feel like a teacher will care about him.”

Parent Preference Factors

Parents’ personal preferences emerged as decision-making factors, which were generally expressed in terms of personal faith/beliefs and alignment of the school’s mission with their personal values. For parents in the private school groups, the religious aspect of their children’s education was important because it reflected their personal faith. As Angela shared, “I wanted my children to grow up to be God fearing people.” Similarly, Trish wanted her daughter to have a religious aspect to her education: “Knowing that she’s learning, not just going to church, but

learning about God." Michaela shared that she was Catholic and it was important for her to know her son had the same upbringing as her.

Parents in the public and charter school groups focused more on how the mission and vision of schools had to align with their personal values. As Kris explained, "I wanted to send him to a school where their mission and vision kind of aligned with my personal beliefs." Similarly, Sharon described the importance of finding a school that "aligns with your vision" as parents.

School-Level Factors

Of the four categories of factors that parents described when making school choice decisions, school-level factors were mentioned most frequently. Fourteen codes aligned with this subtheme, emphasizing a range of school factors, such as diversity, availability of services, teacher communication, uniforms, and academics. The proximity of schools to students' homes was mentioned frequently, with the codes *close proximity* and *transportation limits choices* appearing a total of 27 times. When asked how he chose the school for his child, Ronald replied "[The] school is not too far from the house," explaining that "transportation, of course" was a significant factor. Ashley appreciated the fact that she could "just walk around the corner" to drop off and pick up her kids from school. For Miranda, transportation to and from school were her first considerations:

> The first thing I was thinking about was commute, how she would get there, how she would get back, if we would get a ride for her, or if someone would commute with her or someone would pick her up, drop her off. That was the only thing I thought of at first.

Nancy also mentioned the close proximity of her daughter's school to her father and grandparents. Jennifer explained that for many parents, transportation and school proximity were

leading decision-making factors for student enrollment: “If they don’t have a car, they’re stuck choosing a school that’s a couple blocks away.”

Miranda, Tonya, Ashley, and Nancy all described the importance of racial and cultural diversity. Parents in the charter and private school groups mentioned class size as factors they considered; as Trish shared, “I’m big on class size.” Parents in the charter school groups valued school and teacher communication. Tonya explained,

> I think charter schools have great communication systems. I think I get an email every day. If there's any questions about what's going on, the teacher follows up with you, get pictures of what your child is up to. I think the communication is also stronger than a lot schools.

Similarly, Shanelle described the communication with her oldest son’s charter school as “on point.”

The availability of extracurriculars and other types of special programs or support services were also discussed by parents in all three groups. Kris, Tonya, Michael, and Trish valued extracurricular activities for their children. Sharon and Michaela’s children needed special support services, so these were important criteria for them. Parents in the private and charter groups mentioned school uniforms as important criteria. Tonya shared, “I want them in uniform,” while Nancy said, “I believe in having uniforms.”

Parents from all three groups described the importance of academic outcomes and reputation at the schools they selected for their children. Parents wanted to know their children were being provided with a quality education and given opportunities to learn and excel. Kris said, “School choice for me was based on obviously the academics.” Monica described the district school her child was in as having “phenomenal” and “amazing” student test scores.

Michael said of his son, “we just wanted to make sure that he receives the best education possible” and Tonya mentioned the high rate of graduation and college enrollment at the schools she considered for her child.

Just as important as making sure their children attended quality schools, parents’ decision-making was influenced by a desire to avoid subpar schools, which was a sentiment often attributed to those in the public education system. Several participants mentioned that the schools their children were zoned for were subpar. Jennifer said the schools in closest proximity to a child’s home “may not be a good school” and Monica admitted the school her child was zoned for was “not good.” Michael said the public schools in his neighborhood “didn’t really amount to much.” Miranda shared, “I knew, for a fact, that I didn't want him in public school, only because of the stigma that public high schools have.” Michaela said her son had to attend summer school at a public school one time and hated it. He told Miranda that the students were rude and disruptive – Miranda added, “And this was coming from a fifth grader. This is not a parent who's deciding between public school. This is a fifth grader, who walked into a class, into a school building, and was like, ‘I hate it here.’”

Among participants in the charter and private school groups, there was a general belief that public schools were inferior to private and charter schools, although Michaela and Trish admitted that public schools often had better funding and more services available to students. As Michaela shared, “I think that there are things that are not offered in the private school or in the Catholic schools that are better, that they have more access to in public schools and probably charter schools.” Trish agreed with Michaela’s point, sharing:

> Afterschool programs. I know a lot of the public schools have it, whether it be sports, whether it be arts and crafts. They're offered much more programs than Catholic schools.

> What else? Trips. I feel like a lot of the public schools are offered more than the Catholic schools.

Theme 6: School choice information is inaccessible or unavailable.

The sixth theme to emerge was *school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable.* This theme was in alignment with the third research question and focused on the lack of information and understanding among parents, regarding school choice. Most participants simply felt information was either unavailable or inaccessible. Miranda said, “Information is not out there,” while Michaela shared, “The information just isn’t out there.” Sharon felt there was “not enough information out there.” Tonya and Shanelle both described information about school choice as not being “readily available.” Speaking of her personal research, which turned up nothing related to school choice, Ashley said, “Google doesn't have it and Google has everything. Google ain't got this.” Michaela felt that information was possibly being withheld from, or intentionally not distributed to minority communities. She explained, “they’re not volunteering this information, so we don’t know.” Nancy felt older parents, who may not be as skilled at using computers to conduct research, may not know how to access school choice information. Sharon explained,

> I feel like there's not enough information out there. I may have a list of schools that I'm knowledgeable about, but there may be a couple of schools that may fit my child a little better, but I don't know about it.

Generally, participants in all three groups felt uninformed and were not sure where to find information about school choice. Jennifer shared, “In terms of us finding out the information, I think some of us, we don't know or maybe don't know where to go search for it.” Miranda echoed this sentiment, saying that even when parents were searching for relevant

information, they would not likely find it because they were unknowingly looking in the wrong places.

Parents in all three groups referenced missed opportunities because of the lack of school choice information available to them. For example, speaking of financial assistance opportunities and minority parents, Angela said,

> We just don't know it's out there and we're not taking advantage of it. We're not using it. So I think there's less usage or less students of color using vouchers and even knowing that they're available in certain situations.

Kris said a lack of information on application processes for a magnet school caused her to miss the opportunity to enroll her daughter. Kris later added, "If you don't know… you're going to miss out on that opportunity." Sharon believed information provided through events was given at times that clashed with the schedules of most working parents, preventing them from obtaining necessary school choice information.

Theme 7: Parents should be informed of school choice

The final theme to emerge was *parents should be informed of school choice*, which was also in alignment with the third research question. Across all groups and participants, a strong sentiment existed that schools and leaders must do a better job at making school choice information available to parents and then distributing it to them. Shanelle said information must be made readily available for parents, while Tonya said schools should help inform parents about their options. Miranda said school choice could be more helpful for minority students if information about options were shared with parents in those communities. Monica said, "It's like really getting the information to the parents and the guardians so that we can make an informed choice."

Participants suggested a number of ways that information could be shared with parents, including television, billboards, flyers, and social media. Monica specifically mentioned social media, but also felt schools had a responsibility to reach out to parents, directly. Nancy shared this sentiment, saying schools should be "more proactive" in helping to inform parents about school choice policies.

Summary

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. Data were collected via a single focus group for each of the three cases, for a total of three focus groups. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures for data analysis. A total of 72 codes emerged, and 621 occurrences of codes were noted in the data.

A total of seven themes emerged, including *definitions of school choice provided by minority parents, social perceptions of school choice, economic perceptions of school choice are negative, strategies used to access information, factors in parents' school choice decisions, school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable,* and *parents should be informed of school choice.* Eleven subthemes emerged, including *parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students, tools available for school choice, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, networking, proactive research, financial factors, student-level factors, parent preference factors,* and *school-level factors*.

Trustworthiness of study data was ensured in a few ways. Member checking, a process that involves inviting study participants to review the researcher's preliminary analysis, was used to improve study credibility. Bracketing was also used. Bracketing describes a process in which the researcher takes time, prior to collecting or analyzing study data, to become aware of their personal biases, ideas, and opinions. This process of awareness helps researchers "bracket out" potential biases that may otherwise influence the data (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexive journaling was used to aid with bracketing. The dependability of findings was ensured via an audit trail. Thick description, via detailed records of all study procedures, helped ensure findings were contextualized. In this study, clear details of all study procedures improved transferability. Finally, confirmability was established via reflexive journaling and an audit trail.

A discussion of study findings is provided in the following chapter. Results are contextualized against the existing literature to shed light on how this research added to the body of knowledge. Study implications, both practical and theoretical, are discussed. Opportunities for future research are offered, and limitations are addressed. The chapter closes with the researcher's final thoughts.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study involved an exploration of the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. The aim of this research was to address part of the problem of persistent academic underperformance among minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). Although minority students often perform better in private and charter schools (West, 2016), it is unclear whether minority parents have access to the information needed to engage in school choice. Using the theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1957), this study aimed to understand parents' school choice decision-making processes.

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the results presented in the previous chapter. First, results are summarized, followed by a discussion of findings, contextualized against the existing literature. Practical and theoretical implications are then provided. Study limitations are acknowledged, and opportunities for future research are highlighted. The chapter closes with the researcher's concluding remarks.

Summary of the Results

Data for this study were collected via three focus groups. One group was dedicated to each of the three cases (private, charter, and public schools). Each focus group consisted of five parents, for a total of 15 participants. Focus groups were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Audio from focus groups was transcribed for thematic analysis,

which followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps. Open coding produced a total of 72 codes, with 621 occurrences. The most common codes included *student safety*, *funding*, *close proximity*, *financial limitations*, and *distributing information to parents*. The least frequent codes, with two occurrences each, included *parents don't know where to get information, PTA, outsiders, church, not eligible for financial aid, take money from public*, and *public is better*.

Through axial coding, a total of seven themes were identified, including *definitions of school choice provided by minority parents, social perceptions of school choice, economic perceptions of school choice are negative, strategies used to access information, factors in parents' school choice decisions, school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable,* and *parents should be informed of school choice.* Eleven subthemes emerged, including *parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students, tools available for school choice, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, networking, proactive research, financial factors, student-level factors, parent preference factors,* and *school-level factors*.

Discussion

The first theme to emerge from the data focused on the ways minority parents defined and understood school choice. Focus group questions designed to gauge participants' familiarity with school choice revealed mixed levels of understanding. The first major finding for this theme was that parents from all three cases were generally unfamiliar with school choice. Although most participants in all three groups were unfamiliar with the phrase "school choice," they did seem to understand it involved ways to provide parents with options regarding where their children were educated. Overall, the similarities among parents from the three groups revealed school choice tools were not well understood, and parents across all school types may be lacking

information about these tools. Similarly, the ways parents conducted research on schools and made decisions were similar across cases, with participants relying heavily on their social networks, word of mouth, and personal research.

Although little scholarly research existed on parents' understanding of school choice, this finding regarding poor understanding was in alignment with a 2017 poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Findings from the poll revealed 58% of respondents knew little or nothing about charter schools. Sixty-six percent of the poll respondents said they were unfamiliar with voucher programs for private schools. Similarly, Lucier (2016) found that minority and low-income parents often knew little about school choice and related programs. In a study on school choices among Polish parents with low levels of social capital, Trevena et al. (2016) found parents often lacked information and had misconceptions of the school choice system. Through the lens of bounded rationality, these findings, as well as those from the current study, indicated low participation in school choice by minority students may relate to a lack of access to information needed to make informed school choice decisions.

The second theme to emerge from the data was *social perceptions of school choice*. Generally, most participants had positive social perceptions of school choice, once the researcher explained what it was, viewing it as a tool that created opportunities for students. Despite generally positive sentiments toward school choice, some negative social perceptions were also mentioned. Some participants described difficulties gaining access to chosen schools, even when using available tools. Others felt that available choices were inadequate. Previous researchers have reported on various reasons why parents may have negative perceptions of school choice. For example, Shakeel and Henderson (2019) found parents in rural areas had fewer positive

perceptions of charter schools than did parents in other locales, even after controlling for demographic and political factors. The scholars posited that unfavorable perceptions of charter schools may have been the result of a lack of information or generally higher levels of satisfaction with public schools in the area. That is, parents in Shakeel and Henderson's study were only able to make judgments based on their personal experiences and the information to which they had access. Parents' poor perceptions of charter schools could have changed if they had access to statistics about positive student outcomes and academic success when attending charter schools. As bounded rationality suggests, parents form opinions and make decisions based on what they know, and that knowledge may not always be complete. Similarly, Marsh et al. (2015) posited that low participation in school choice among parents in Los Angeles may have been related to skepticism about access and fairness of school choice policies. Such skepticism could be based on facts and evidence, just as they could also be based on inaccurate information and faulty judgments.

The third theme focused on participants' negative economic perceptions of school choice. Even with tools such as vouchers and tax credits, participants felt available funding limited school choice. That is, parents perceived economic barriers to school choice, despite school choice tools. Negative economic perceptions may have been related to participants' lack of awareness of financial assistance available through school choice policies. In addition, participants explained that parents may assume aid is not available, or that they do not qualify for it, and so they do not even seek it out. Similar findings were reported by previous researchers. For example, Egalite et al.'s (2020) study of low-income parents' participation in a school choice program revealed that even with vouchers of $4200 per year, eligible families were still unable to participate in school choice because of other hidden costs. Parents in Egalite et al.'s study often

did not participate in school choice because they could not access information about the program, or had a hard time getting through the application process. In this way, bounded rationality could explain parents' perceptions that school choice is not accessible to low-income families. If parents are unable to access information regarding vouchers, tax credits, or lotteries, or if they conclude that school choice is not accessible based on information they receive from others, they may come to inaccurate conclusions about the affordability or accessibility of private or charter schools.

The fourth theme to emerge from the investigation was *strategies used to access information*. This theme aligned with the third research question and revealed two main types of strategies: networking and proactive research. Networking was the most discussed strategy used by participants to gain information about schools and choice options. A number of participants also described ways they proactively conducted research to gather information needed to make school choice decisions, conducting their own research, asking questions, and reaching out to others in their social networks for advice. Previous researchers highlighted similar ways parents acquired information to make school choice decisions. For example, Fong (2019) found parents often used their social networks to access school choice information, but explained that inequalities in these networks could undermine access to information for some parents. Similarly, Fosunen and Riviere (2018) found differences in parents' social networks could create inequities in access to school choice information. More affluent families typically have access to better information through their social networks, while less privileged families often lack access to well-informed networks.

Theme five was one of the richest themes to emerge from the analysis, focusing on the factors that influenced parents' school choice decisions. Some parents from all groups mentioned

financial factors in their school choice decision-making processes. Financial limitations and sacrifice were common factors brought up, which were echoed in previous scholarship. For example, Assefa and Stansbury's (2018) study of school choice decisions among low-income immigrant parents revealed low levels of school choice participation, which parents attributed to their economic situations. Pattilo (2015) also reported economic barriers in the school choice decisions of African American parents. The scholar noted costs and transportation challenges often prevented African American parents from evaluating attendance options other than public schools (Patillo, 2015).

Parents' personal preferences emerged as decision-making factors, which were generally expressed in terms of personal faith or beliefs and alignment of the school's mission with their personal values. Cohen-Zada and Sander's (2008) research aligned with this finding, as the scholars reported religion was a strong factor in the school choice decisions of many parents. In the current study, parents in the public and charter school groups focused more on how the mission and vision of schools had to align with their personal values. Similarly, Boerema (2009) found school mission factored strongly into parents' school choice decisions.

The sixth theme to emerge was *school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable.* Most participants simply felt information was either unavailable or inaccessible. Generally, participants in all three groups felt uninformed and were not sure where to find information about school choice. Parents in all three groups referenced missed opportunities because of the lack of school choice information available to them. These findings were reflective of those presented by Egalite et al. (2020). Parents the study often did not participate in school choice because they could not access information about the program, or had a hard time getting through the application process (Egalite et al., 2020).

The final theme to emerge was *parents should be informed of school choice*. Across all groups and participants, a strong sentiment existed that schools and leaders must do a better job at making school choice information available to parents and then distributing it to them. Participants suggested several ways information could be shared with parents, including television, billboards, flyers, and social media. Previous researchers have reported on the problem related to the poor information provided to parents regarding school choice. Ultimately, if parents are not informed about school choice, they cannot participate. Greene et al.'s (2008) study revealed that even when parents tried to obtain school choice information by contacting schools, they were met with resistance or provided little to no information as a result. Corcoran and Jennings (2019) explained that even when parents had general understandings about school choice, they lacked hard information to make strong, informed decisions. That is, parents in Corcoran and Jennings' study, like those in the current study, had cursory understanding of school choice but did not know enough details about programs and resources to guide their school choice decisions.

Implications

Theoretical

The framework for this study was based on three theories: bounded rationality (Simon, 1957), the economic theory of school choice (Betts, 2005), and critical race theory (Delgado, 1995). Simon's (1957) bounded rationality is an economic theory that purports individuals make decisions based on cognitive limitations and the information available to them. Instead of viewing decision-making as a completely rational process, bounded rationality acknowledges that the rationality of any decision is always bound by the information available to an individual, as well as his or her capacity to process that information. Simon's theory suggests that parents'

decisions vary depending on the information available to them, as well as their abilities to understand and navigate that information. For example, exercising school choice via the application of school vouchers requires that parents understand voucher programs are available to them in the first place. However, even if parents understand school choice and the availability of vouchers, they then must understand how to leverage that knowledge to apply for vouchers.

In the current study, access to and utilization of information was certainly a barrier to school choice. Overall, parents often demonstrated paltry understandings of school choice, had inaccurate assumptions about the school choice tools available to them, and did not participate in school choice because they did not know how to navigate school choice options, even when they had access to information. In this way, bounded rationality provided an excellent explanation for low levels of school choice participation among minority parents. In addition, bounded rationality provided a useful lens for addressing inequities in access to information to promote more social equality within the system of school choice. If leaders desire to level the playing field and increase minority students' participation in school choice, then their parents must be provided with critical information, and they must have the skills to comprehend, apply, and utilize that information to engage in school choice.

While Simon's (1957) theory was helpful for viewing parents' decision-making, relative to school choice, it failed to highlight important economic elements of school choice. Thus, the second theory of the current study's framework was Betts' (2005) economic theory of school choice. Economic theory provided a useful lens for examining school choice and the racial achievement gap. Although opponents often argued that school choice widens the achievement gap, Betts' theory purported that school choice had the potential to improve educational quality while reducing the achievement gap. Although public school choice is limited to families'

residential decisions, choices to attend public charters and private schools (via voucher programs) may even the economic playing field and provide minority students with access to higher quality education.

In the current study, the potential of economic theory to *level the playing* field for minority students was contingent upon parents' access to information, as well as their abilities to utilize that information to participate in school choice. The availability of vouchers and lotteries does not improve academic opportunities for minority students if they are unable to access those systems. Further, vouchers, lotteries, and tax credits cannot make up for other barriers to school choice participation that minority students may face, such as transportation to and from schools outside of their public school zones. Thus, the ability of school choice to create access to better schools, from the lens of economic theory, does not necessarily improve opportunities or equity for minority students.

While bounded rationality provided an important lens for examining decision-making, and the economic theory of school choice was useful for examining the economic underpinnings of school choice, a race-related theory was also needed to examine the topic from the perspectives of minority parents. Accordingly, critical race theory (CRT; Delgado, 1995) was included to help unpack any racial and cultural themes that emerged from the study. According to Delgado (1995), CRT is based on the notion that racism is a deeply entrenched and normalized part of our culture. CRT argues that equality cannot be truly achieved with the slow, incremental changes that have occurred in recent decades; rather, addressing racism requires large, sweeping changes.

Through the lens of CRT, it is apparent that systemic racial inequalities remain pervasive in today's educational system. Even with school choice tools, minority students face economic-

and resource-related barriers that undermine their participation in school choice. Because minority students are disproportionately represented in low-income neighborhoods with low-performing schools, they are relegated to attending these schools unless they have access to other schools. Such access often, even with vouchers and lotteries, creates additional economic burdens for parents. Without transportation to schools, which requires access to additional resources, minority students are unable to participate in school choice. In this way, CRT provides an important reminder that racial inequity is a complex problem that requires a multifaceted approach. The promotion of educational equity through school choice requires the provision of additional resources to minority students, such as transportation or financial assistance to cover other costs associated with attending non-public or out-of-zone schools. Efforts to reduce systemic racial inequities in school choice must go beyond vouchers and lotteries. CRT reminds us that while progress has been made toward promoting educational equity for minority students, there is still much work to be done.

Practical

Findings from this study provide guidance that may improve parents' participation in school choice programs. The most obvious and important practical recommendation is to increase minority parents' access to school choice information. Many participants in this study were unfamiliar with school choice and the different programs available to them to improve access to school choice. In addition, some parents assumed school choice was out of reach because they believed they were not eligible for assistance, which may not have been the case. Both problems can be alleviated by increasing the information available to minority parents, regarding school choice. Rather than rely on social networks, private and charter schools must reach out to minority parents to provide them with key information they need to participate in

school choice. Not only should parents be provided with information, but they should be guided through confusing processes required for school choice participation, such as participating in lotteries and tax credits.

The provision of information and helping parents utilize that information may not only create more equal access to school choice among minority students, but it may also dispel myths and misinformation parents sometimes have regarding school choice. In addition to a lack of access to accurate school choice information, a major barrier to school choice participation among minority students seems to pertain to poor access to economic resources. Even with vouchers and tax credits, parents of minority students may lack logistic resources, such as transportation, to get their students to preferred schools outside of their public school zones. Consequently, vouchers and tax credits are not enough to create equity in school choice participation. Underprivileged minority students may require additional resources, such as transportation and stipends to cover additional costs of attendance. Funding for such resources may be allocated through state funds or fundraising events. Educational leaders and policymakers much work together to identify and distribute necessary resources to improve access to school choice among underprivileged minority students.

Limitations

This study was subject to limitations. The first limitation was time. Focus group data were collected for three single points in time. Data collected over a longer span may have provided different insights into parents' experiences and understandings relative to school choice. However, time constraints related to the researcher's academic program precluded longitudinal investigation. Time was also a limitation. The researcher had a difficult time

recruiting participants for the focus group, as many prospects were unable or unwilling to allocate the hour required for the focus group.

The study was also limited to the reported knowledge and experiences of individual participants. The small sample size, which was characteristic of qualitative investigation, prevented the generalization of findings to other populations. This limitation was accepted, as the aim was not to produce generalizable findings. The researchers had no reason to believe urban schools in the study site location would have differed from other areas int eh United States.A final limitation related to the social nature of data collected through focus groups. The researcher had no way of confirming any of the information provided by parents and had to assume they were providing open and honest responses to the questions. While confidentiality was assured, it is possible that some participants may have censored their responses in ways that made them appear better to their peers and the researcher. That is, it is possible that participants may have withheld or embellished information to manage their image and reputation among fellow parents and professionals. This is an unavoidable limitation of focus groups, but was accepted upon the grounds that participants would have little incentive to falsify responses to questions posed in the groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

Opportunities for future research emerged from this investigation. Because this study only focused on parents at one school in a specific urban location, future researchers could replicate this study with parents from schools in other parts of the country, where different school choice processes or incentives exist. Future researchers could also examine possible differences in parents' understandings, based on urban and rural locations, the ages of their children, parents' educational backgrounds, or other defining characteristics.

Another opportunity for investigation would involve collecting data through individual interviews, rather than focus groups. One-on-one semi structured interviews may provide more forthcoming and honest information because participants would feel less compelled to alter or censor their responses to manage their images in front of their peers. Researchers could also consider following up on the current research through a large, quantitative investigation that utilized online surveys. The current study only examined perceptions of minority parents from three different schools in the same geographic location. A large, quantitative survey could provide more representative and generalizable findings. In addition, online surveys may have better participation rates due to ease of use and low time commitment required from participants.

Because an enduring problem with school choice participation seems to be access to information required to make informed decisions, future researchers could design and test campaigns designed to provide minority parents with key information about school choice. In addition, resources should be developed to help parents participate in school choice processes, such as applications for lotteries and tuition vouchers. Misinformation about school choice must be addressed to ensure all parents have access to information required to inform the school choice decision-making processes.

Findings from this study suggested parents' school choice decisions were based on their access to information and resources required to participate in school choice. Future researchers could test the relationship between access to school choice information, ability to process and use that information to make decisions, and the choices parents ultimately make regarding school choice. It would also be of benefit to examine whether the relationships between these variables differed based on parents' demographic traits, such as race, socioeconomic status, marital status, education level, etc.

Finally, future researchers could look at patterns and changes in school choice decisions, through longitudinal investigations. The current study only examined the school choice decisions of minority parents for a single point in time, but it is likely that politics and other factors affecting the social climate may influence how parents access information and the decisions they ultimately make about school choice. Thus, an ongoing investigation may shed new light on outside factors that influence school choice decisions, which were not captured in the current study.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to address the problem of persistent academic underperformance among minority students (Balfanz et al., 2012; Murnane, 2013). This study involved an exploration of the decision-making process regarding school choice among minority parents with students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, the researcher explored parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, and (c) overall perceptions of school choice. Through axial coding, a total of seven themes were identified, including *definitions of school choice provided by minority parents, social perceptions of school choice, economic perceptions of school choice are negative, strategies used to access information, factors in parents' school choice decisions, school choice information is inaccessible or unavailable,* and *parents should be informed of school choice.* Eleven subthemes emerged, including *parents unfamiliar with school choice, school choice describes options for parents and students, tools available for school choice, positive perceptions, negative perceptions, networking, proactive research, financial factors, student-level factors, parent preference factors,* and *school-level factors*.

While school choice has the potential to improve academic outcomes for minority students, the current research highlighted challenges in parent's decision-making processes that may undermine the potential of school choice to improve educational equity. Leaders and policymakers must work together to improve access to information and resources for minority parents and their children. Further, leaders must develop strategies to provide minority parents and students with the additional resources required to participate in school choice. Ultimately, school choice can only be a tool for improving educational outcomes for minority students if they are able to participate in school choice programs. More work is needed in this area, but a growing awareness of inequities in school choice programs are integral to improving programs and promoting access for all students.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

1. Let's begin by discussing school choice. I'd like to know what you know about school choice, and what your overall opinions or perceptions are of school choice policies. To start, how do you define school choice?
2. What are your overall perceptions of school choice policies?
3. Do you believe school choice policies can be helpful for minority students? If so, in what ways?
4. Do you believe school choice policies are detrimental to minority students? If so, in what ways?
5. From a social perspective – that is, considering your community, culture, background, networks, etc. – how do you perceive school choice policies to impact minority children?
6. From an economic perspective – that is, considering access to different types of schools – how do you perceive school choice policies to impact minority children?
7. What information have you been able to access about school choice, and how have you accessed that information?
8. Do you think school choice information is readily accessible to parents of minority children? Why or why not?
9. Are there any ways you believe information about school choice options and tools could be made more accessible to parents of minority children?
10. Thinking about the school choice decisions made for your own children, please describe the decision-making process. That is, how did you arrive at your decisions to enroll your children in public, charter, or private schools?

11. Is there any additional information about school choice decisions among parents of minority children that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Study Title: School Choice Decision-Making among Parents of Young Minority Students

Greetings!

I am Jeannette Boursiquot, a student at Long Island University and am conducting research as part of the requirement for my Doctor of Education degree in Interdisciplinary Education. I am inviting you to participate in this study. Please take your time to read the information below and feel free to ask any questions before signing this document.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore understandings of why parents choose one type of school over another. I will conduct focus groups with parents who have students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, I will explore parents'

- awareness of school choice tools, which includes what they know about available tools, such as lotteries and voucher programs;
- experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, which will include any positive and negative experiences parents have had when exercising school choice;
- and overall perceptions of school choice, which will include parents' attitudes and perceptions toward school choice, based on their experiences and the information that has been provided to them.

Procedures: If you agree to be a part of this study, you will participate in a focus group with other minority parents. Focus groups will be conducted online, via Zoom meeting, in accordance with social distancing measures. I expect focus groups to last approximately 60-90 minutes. The focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After I complete the preliminary analysis, I will provide you with a copy to ensure the analysis aligns with the information you intended to communicate.

Risks to Participation: The only risk to participation is the possible breach of confidentiality. To protect you from this risk, you will select a pseudonym that will be used in all study data. I will not retain a key that links your identity with your pseudonym, and care will be taken to ensure the protection of all study data. No identifying information about you or your children will be published.

Benefits to Participants: You will not directly benefit from this study. However, by examining parents' knowledge and experiences related to school choice, this study could reveal ways to improve minority students' access to high quality education.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be protected via pseudonym. In addition, the name of the school and school district your child attends will not be published. All study data will be stored on my password-protected computer. Audio recordings of interviews will be deleted after the interviews are transcribed. Data will be destroyed by a professional data destruction company.

Questions/Concerns: If you have questions related to the procedures described in this consent form, please contact me, Jeannette Boursiquot, at 347-493-4580 or jeannette.boursiquot@my.liu.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights in this research study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Administrator, Dr. Lacey Sischo, via email (lacey.sischo@liu.edu) or phone (516-299-3591).

Consent to Participate in Research

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign below and return this form to me, via email, at jeannette.boursiquot@my.liu.edu.

I have read the above information and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I understand the research project and the procedures involved have been explained to me. I agree to participate in this study. My participation is voluntary and I do not have to sign this form if I do not want to be part of this research project. I may retain a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____
Name of Participant (print)

_____
Signature of Participant

Date: _____

Appendix C: Study Invitation

Greetings!
As a parent of a minority child attending elementary school in [study site school district], you have been identified as eligible for participation in research that must be completed as part of my Doctor of Education degree in Interdisciplinary Education. I am inviting you to participate in this study. To be eligible, you must be: (a) over the age of 18 years, (b) a racial minority, and (c) the parent of an elementary school student currently enrolled in a private, public charter, or traditional public schools in the study site school district.

The purpose of this study is to explore understandings of why parents choose one type of school over another. I will conduct focus groups with parents who have students enrolled in three types of schools: (a) public charter, (b) private, and (c) traditional public. Specifically, I will explore parents': (a) awareness of school choice tools, which includes what they know about available tools, such as lotteries and voucher programs; (b) experiences exercising school choice and seeking out resources on behalf of their children, which will include any positive and negative experiences parents have had when exercising school choice; and (c) overall perceptions of school choice, which will include parents' attitudes and perceptions toward school choice, based on their experiences and the information that has been provided to them.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you agree to be a part of this research, you will participate in a focus group with other minority parents. Focus groups will be conducted online, via Zoom meeting, in accordance with social distancing measures. I expect focus groups to last approximately 60-90 minutes. The focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After I complete the preliminary analysis, I will provide you with a copy to ensure the analysis aligns with the information you intended to communicate.

Although there will be no incentives offered, your participation in this study on school choice may reveal ways to improve minority students' access to high quality education.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at 347-493-4580 or jeannette.boursiquot@my.liu.edu to review your eligibility and schedule your focus group. You are also encouraged to contact me with any study-related questions you may have.

Thank you,
Jeannette Boursiquot