All Choices Created Equal?

How Good Parents Select "Failing" Schools

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Abstract

Recent reports suggest that the vast majority (up to 97%) of parents with children in "failing" schools choose to leave their children in those schools, even when it is their legal right to do otherwise. These reports -- and the puzzling behavior they describe -- draw attention to researchers' limited ability to explain parents' actions. This study addresses this limitation by investigating the "black box" of choice -- the processes parents use to choose. Based on interviews with 48 urban parents during the eight months preceding the selection of a middle or high school, the study finds that differences in the choice process did not explain why parents chose failing schools. Instead, differences in choice sets explain, in part, why parents choose the schools they do. Using social networks, customary attendance patterns, and their understanding of their child's academic achievement, parents constructed choice sets that varied systematically by social-class background. The differences between parents' choice sets were statistically significant and provide insight into why it makes sense that well-intentioned parents choose failing schools. The study's findings elaborate our understanding of the choice process and, in so doing, raise concerns about the ability of current choice policies to deliver the equity outcomes reformers suggest.

The argument for school choice conceptualizes parents as consumers. Parents gather information about schools' test scores, specialized programs, and teachers (Armor & Peiser, 1997), weigh the costs and benefits of attending certain schools, and "vote with their feet." The argument suggests that, given the opportunity, parents will choose better schools. "Voting" will send market signals to "failing" schools; those schools will be forced to close or fundamentally change.

Perhaps more than any other reform, school choice hinges on parents. If parents don't choose "better" schools, choice simply doesn't work. Yet reports suggest that this logical argument is not without its paradoxes. Through choice, charters, magnet schools, and vouchers, parents now have many more schools to choose from. And yet, only a tiny percentage of parents actually take advantage of these expanded options. Schemo (2002) and Robelen (2002) report that, of the 3.5 million children who are eligible under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) to move out of failing schools, only 2 to 3% have done so. The national picture varies by region but is consistent: few eligible parents opt out of failing schools (Asimov, 2003; Gupta, 2004; Moses, 2004). This suggests that parents are explicitly choosing failing schools, or they are choosing "not to choose." Either way, despite more choices than ever before, many parents do not take advantage of these new alternatives.

Scholars explain why parents choose failing schools in at least two ways. The first type of explanation focuses on the sub-optimal nature of parents' decisions. For example, some scholars argue that urban parents, many of whom are single mothers, do not have time to adequately research choice options and thus are under-informed (e.g., Henig, 1994). Others point to parents who are uninterested in their children's education or make decisions that are somewhat less than "rational" (e.g., Asimov, 2003; Holme, 2002). A second explanation focuses on market

imperfections. Researchers contend there is not enough high quality information (e.g., Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000), there are not enough schools to choose from (e.g., Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997), or there is not adequate transportation available (e.g., Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). While both explanations enjoy some empirical support, neither has led to a robust understanding of parental choice since they fail to convincingly explain why the vast majority of parents (approximately 97%) choose to leave their children in failing schools.

This study develops an alternative explanation of parents' behavior by investigating the school choice process over the eight months preceding the selection of a school. In contrast to assertions that parents choose failing schools because their choice processes are somehow flawed (i.e., deficiencies in their reasoning), I find that choice processes do not vary significantly across parents; thus, they cannot explain differences in parents' choices. Parents do vary, however, in the schools from which they select, for their choice sets differ dramatically. This investigation offers a new explanation of how it makes sense for parents to select seemingly undesirable schools and, in doing so, points out the importance of understanding choice sets in the design of choice policy aimed at the provision of more equitable education.

Theoretical Framework

Research on parental choice is conceptualized using rational choice theory (RCT). Applying RCT to parents, researchers assume that parents value "good" schools and that good schools may differ from one another. One may have a good arts program, another high test scores. These assumptions resonate with research that suggests that some parents select academically superior schools (Armor & Peiser, 1997; David, West, & Ribbens, 1994; Witte, 2000). However, these assumptions are inconsistent with other research, including interview

studies (Wells, 1993), evidence from the U.K. (David, et al., 1994), and actual parents' behavior. Some parents do not prefer what others call the "best" schools. Thus, choice may be more complicated than has heretofore been assumed.

Three constructs underlie rational choice models: information, constraints, and preferences. If we treat information as a constraint, individual choices hinge on constraints and preferences. The constraints that have the most significant influence on parents' choices include educational attainment, family income, information, and the child's prior academic record (David et al., 1994; Gauri, 1998; Schneider et al., 2000; Wells, 1993; Witte, 2000). Preferences include, but are not limited to, parental desires that fall into the categories David et al. (1994) describe as "the three P's -- the academic results or *performance* [italics in original]; the atmosphere/ethos or *pleasant feel*; and the school's location or *proximity to home*" (p. 136). Scholars who investigate these preferences conclude that parents prefer schools which perform better, are welcoming and inviting, are close to home, match their values, and have high levels of parental involvement both in school and out of school (Armor & Peiser, 1997; David et al., 1994; Godwin, Kemerer, & Martinez, 1998; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Wells, 1996).

Though prior research has illuminated relevant constraints and preferences, there remain two shortcomings in the research, which are particularly important to understanding why parents choose the schools they do.   The first is conceptual, the second empirical.

A conceptual shortcoming concerns the process by which constraints and preferences interact to produce a choice. Bast and Walberg's (2004) explanation of how parents choose is representative of the literature more generally: "Parents choose schools for their children based on costs and benefits (incentives), the availability of information, and the presence of opportunities (choices)" (p. 432). Like many other researchers, Bast and Walberg do not specify

how those constructs shape behavior. They simply assume that parents "maximize utility," that is, they make the "best" choice. But what does that process actually look like? How, for example, do parents assign weights to particular costs and benefits? When do they assign those weights? What is the role of time in all of this weighing and maximizing? The straightforward statement that parents choose based on incentives and costs does little to explain the choice process that actually occurs. Thus, the research that forms the backbone of the choice literature largely treats the choice process as a black box, whose internal workings remain a mystery.

An empirical shortcoming that hampers our ability to understand parents' behavior is researchers' reliance on relativistic measures. Two common examples illustrate the problem. Choice researchers routinely measure parental satisfaction. But this is problematic. As Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000) point out, "Satisfaction is almost always relative. While surveys usually ask questions about satisfaction as if it were an absolute, people can only answer relative to what they know or expect" (p. 129). The same logic applies to survey questions that ask parents to retrospectively rank factors influencing their desire to choose a particular school. When parents report that they desire a "high quality" teacher or an "academically challenging" school, this does little to help us understand the empirical basis for such reports. Parents define "high" or "challenging" as they understand it, based on their experiences. For one parent, an Ivy League school might be challenging, for another, the local community college. Thus, given the relativistic nature of those labels, reporting that parents are more satisfied or prefer high quality teachers does little to help us empirically understand educational outcomes and parents' preferences.

While this study uses RCT to develop a situated and dynamic understanding of parents' choices, it parts with the existing empirical literature by going inside the black box of the choice

process. In doing so, the study builds an understanding that is grounded in parents' actions, thereby avoiding some pitfalls associated with strictly relativistic measures.

Methods

Since 1994, parents living in Weldon, a large Midwestern city, and the adjacent ring of suburbs have enjoyed choice options which include some 98 charter, 393 private, and 389 traditional public schools. In order to understand what influences parents' reasoning in this choice rich environment, I designed a longitudinal comparative case study of 48 parents' thinking prior to their children attending 6th or 9th grade. The transitions from 5th to 6th and 8th to 9th grades are ones in which many children move from elementary to middle or middle to high school. At this juncture, parents might be particularly willing to consider alternative schools. The study's design maximizes diverse prior choices as a proxy for diverse parental thinking. Thus, it includes parents who previously sent their children to both failing and non-failing schools across six types of schools (neighborhood public, magnet public, charter, secular private, non-secular private, and homeschool). By studying this diverse group of parents over time, it is possible to understand how parents' understanding changes and evolves in interaction with the choice environment.

Sampling

Weldon was selected because there are many choice options available to parents -- a high density of charter and private schools as well as nearby districts that can be accessed through inter-district choice. All elementary and middle schools five miles on either side of the border between Weldon and the adjacent suburbs were classified as failing or non-failing. A school was considered failing if it was on the state's 2000-2001 list of failing schools or (in the case of private and non-secular schools) was unaccredited by any accrediting agency.[1]

To maximize access to diverse parental reasoning, a purposeful sample of one failing and one non-failing school was selected for each of five school types (neighborhood pubic, magnet public, charter public, secular private, and non-secular private). School principals were asked to supply a list of 5th (or 8th) graders' addresses. By using 2000 census data, the addresses were assigned a median family income based on their face block. Addresses were then stratified into low, middle, and high income categories.[2] Potential participants were randomly selected from each of the three income groups and contacted by telephone.[3] This resulted in a sample of 48 parents stratified by their current status at a failing or non-failing school and median family income (see Table 1). Parents with similar characteristics replaced those parents who declined participation.[4] The sample of 45 mothers and 3 fathers was comprised of 67% African-Americans, 27% whites, 4% Hispanics, and 2% people of other races.

[Table 1 about here]

I used three interviews to capture and track parents' situated and dynamic reasoning. The first interview occurred in February (face-to-face), the second in June (face-to-face), and the third in October (phone). The interviews averaged 60, 49, and 34 minutes, respectively. All told, 112 hours of interviews were conducted with the 48 parents. All interviews were audio recorded. Parents were compensated for their participation with a $30 gift-certificate to a store of their choice.

Data analyses were iterative and interviews moved from unstructured to structured in order to accommodate emerging hypotheses. All interviews were transcribed, read into the qualitative software, N6, and coded. Coded data were then tabulated, entered into Excel, checked for accuracy, and imported into the statistical software package, SAS. Once in SAS, descriptive statistics were generated around issues of parental reasoning (e.g., the number of schools

considered and applied to, the type of choice process, etc.). As discrepancies emerged and

additional categories were needed, the process was repeated. This process of analyzing data

allowed hypotheses to be tested, accepted or rejected, and revised as necessary. Simultaneously,

I wrote analytic memos about patterns and themes that arose while reading and coding the data.

These memos were used as the catalyst for discussions with colleagues; those conversations, and

the SAS and N6 data analyses sent me back to the data for additional rounds of analysis.

The Choice Process

As mentioned before, choice research relies on a black box approach to the choice

process. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework of college choice is used to open that black

box and describe parents' K-12 choice processes.[5] The framework is then used to compare poor

and working-class parents' choice processes with those of middle-class parents. These analyses

suggest that the selection of different schools by middle-class and poor and working-class

parents is not explainable by differences in their choice processes. Parents across social classes

use similar processes to choose different schools.[6]

A Framework for Understanding K-12 Choice

Before we consider the choice processes of all the Weldon parents, I will briefly sketch

Hossler and Gallagher's model and apply it to one parent's choice process. By sharing one

parent's choice process, I illustrate how the categories in the choice model were applied to all 48

parents' choice processes. Finally, I turn to the patterns of behavior across the Weldon parents.

Hossler and Gallagher propose three stages in the choice process: predisposition, search,

and choice. The predisposition stage "is the developmental stage in which students determine

whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school" (p. 209). If they

so choose, students move on to the search stage in which they "gather information about

institutions of higher education" (p. 209). During the search stage, some students also develop

criteria for judging schools. The third and final stage, the choice stage, is when student actually

decide on a college or university to attend. Hossler and Gallagher emphasize the interactions

embedded in all stages, explaining that -- throughout the stages -- both organizational and

individual factors interact to create outcomes, which, in turn, influence the ultimate school

selection.

There are a number of important differences between the choice of a college and that of a

middle or high school. Three are worth noting. First, K-12 school attendance is compulsory,

which means that parents have to make a choice. College choice is optional. Because there is no

decision about whether or not your child will go to middle school, there is essentially no

predisposition phase in the way Hossler and Gallagher describe it. Second, there is no history of

assigned colleges. No one goes to the "neighborhood college" because they are assigned to go

there. In K-12 education, there is a 150 year history of children being assigned to their

neighborhood schools.[7] This presents conceptual and practical problems that make K-12 school

searches different from college searches. From a practical perspective, many K-12 parents

already have at least one school that their child is allowed to attend. This may mean that parents

do not need to "search" at all. From a conceptual perspective, parents may or may not continue

to think of their neighborhood school as the school their child is "supposed" to attend. This could

result in no search or a search in which every other school is compared to the assigned school.

The final difference between college and K-12 choice is the age of the children. In the case of

college choice, the student, whether or not she makes the choice alone or with her parents, is an

adult. She can drive, vote, and maintain employment. The choice of a K-12 school is one made

on behalf of the child. Depending on the family and the age of the child, children may participate

in the choice to a greater or lesser degree (David et al., 1994; Wells, 1996), but the parent is legally responsible for the child's welfare. For these reasons, I make use of the predisposition, search, and choice framework, but modify it to reflect the differences described above.

In order to see how the framework applies to K-12 choice, we turn to Mrs. Gunnison's choice process. This vignette allows us to see how the three stages map onto a parent and her local schooling market.

Predetermination, Search, and Choice for Mrs. Gunnison

Mrs. Gunnison, an African-American woman in her 40's, has three children, Randy (28), Doug (16) and Jewel (10). Jewel, the target child, is a gifted, talkative, and curious 5th grader. Jewel spent 3rd and 4th grade in a private gifted school, which both Mrs. Gunnison and Jewel loved. Mrs. Gunnison is a single mother and, although she is an emergency room nurse, she could not afford to continue to send Jewel to private school. So Jewel spent her 5th grade year in a magnet school just a few blocks from her home.

Mrs. Gunnison does not want to send Jewel to her assigned neighborhood middle school, Clark. Mrs. Gunnison tried the school with her middle child, Doug, and found that "the kids are running that school, not the adults." Mrs. Gunnison explained, "To go to Clark is survival. And kids deserve more than that." Mrs. Gunnison prefers a middle school with a clean environment, courteous staff, and energetic teachers who are able to control their classrooms enough to teach. Because Jewel is a smart, capable student, Mrs. Gunnison does not want a school where Jewel is forced to do busywork. This will bore Jewel and lead to discipline problems (which is what precipitated Jewel's earlier move to the private school). She wants Jewel's natural curiosity to be nourished, encouraged, and channeled in productive directions: "If I can keep her focused and in the right atmosphere, she'll want to learn, she'll want to go on [to college]."

In early February during our first interview, Mrs. Gunnison mentioned eight schools. She heard about many of them through friends and family. Others she discovered through the mail. By June, Mrs. Gunnison had applied to South Mill, the charter school her older son Doug attends. But she was not completely satisfied that it was a good match for Jewel. Even through South Mill had "done wonders" for Doug and Mrs. Gunnison knew the teachers at the school very well, she was still worried about the degree to which Jewel would be challenged.

On 5th grade graduation day in mid-June, the school social worker approached Mrs. Gunnison and asked where Jewel would be going to middle school. Mrs. Gunnison explained that Jewel had been accepted at South Mill, but that she -- Ms. Gunnison -- was still open to suggestions. The social worker insisted that Jewel attend either Bedrock (a magnet school) or Forward Academy (another magnet school), arguing that these were the only two schools "good enough" for Jewel. Based on information from friends whose children attend Bedrock, Mrs. Gunnison felt that Bedrock had too much busywork, so she was not willing to send Jewel there. She had never heard of Forward, but within days, she went to the school, visited classrooms, met with the parent/teacher liaison, and decided to send Jewel there in the fall.

There are many things Mrs. Gunnison liked about the school. It was small and filled with children of different ethnic backgrounds. It has a "looser" structure, one based on students' interests, rather the "drill and kill" approach other schools use. She felt that teachers would be able to challenge the students because of the small classes. Finally, Mrs. Gunnison liked the 12 hour/year volunteer requirement for parents.

If we apply Hossler and Gallagher's model to Mrs. Gunnison, it is clear that Mrs. Gunnison knew she wanted to conduct a search because the assigned school was a non-option (predetermination). Between January and June, Mrs. Gunnison became aware of particular

schools, chose to investigate some, and apply to others (search). In June, she chose between two schools, Forward Academy and South Mill (choice). In the next sections, I discuss the results of an analysis in which I applied this heuristic of predetermination, search, and choice to all 48 parents. Upon doing so, similarities in the choice processes among parents of different social-class backgrounds became clear.

Predetermination Across Parents

Weldon parents are in an option-demand choice environment. This means children are assigned to neighborhood schools but parents can opt out of those schools, most often into charter or magnet schools (Schneider et al., 2000). Of the 48 parents in the study, 40 previously opted out of their neighborhood schools. But substantially fewer opted out of customary attendance patterns, that is, the patterns made when children attend an expected sequence of schools (elementary, middle, and high). These patterns are comprised of what Fiske and Ladd (2000) call "feeder schools." The customary attendance pattern, often unofficial and unwritten, provides a ready-made "next school(s)" for most parents. It is easy to opt out of the neighborhood school but not out of the customary school because these patterns exist in every sector: private, public, non-secular and homeschool. For example, if one is already enrolled in a private or magnet 8th grade, the customary pattern may not include the neighborhood high school. Instead it might include another private or magnet school. This makes it possible for a parent to choose a school in the customary pattern but not in the neighborhood. Given parents' previous choices, in the predetermination phase they have to answer a question: Do I need to conduct a search? The answer depends on the parents' preferences regarding both the assigned school and the default customary attendance pattern.

Among the 48 Weldon parents, 33 conducted a search and 15 did not. The 15 parents who did not conduct a search were not lazy or disinterested, for they talked extensively and exhaustively about their decision-making. They chose not to conduct searches for a range of reasons. Nine of the 15 parents reported that no other schools offered what they wanted. These parents knew the local schooling market from prior searches conducted for older siblings, felt confident that the school in the customary attendance pattern was exactly what they wanted, and were sure that other schools would not be able to offer what the customary school did. Three of the 15 said that the customary school was a good school with a good reputation, so they were willing to try it. The remaining three parents reported that they were comfortable with the customary school and would reassess their decision after the next school year. Although the choice process effectively ended in the predetermination stage for one third of parents, approximately two thirds of parents did search for a school and, thus, help us understand the next stage in the choice process.

Search Across Parents

There are two search procedures by which parents come to select a school for their child. The first, the open search, begins with a larger set of schools and, over time -- in interaction with the schooling market -- narrows to some smaller set of schools, from which the parent ultimately selects. Mrs. Gunnison's actions exemplify an open search. The second search procedure, a closed search, is a procedure by which the parent has two, sometimes three, schools in mind. The parent does not seek out other schools to consider and, instead, spends time gathering information about the schools and making the necessary preparations for the child to attend the schools. Preparations include actions such as taking entrance exams, organizing finances, and

arranging transportation. The major differences between an open and a closed search are the number of schools considered and the desire to find additional alternatives to consider.

Of the 33 Weldon parents who conducted a search, 11 performed a closed search and 22 performed an open one. On average, closed searches contained 3.4 schools, open searches contained 7.5 schools. A more detailed description of factors which shape the search phase will be taken up shortly.

It is worth noting here, however, that choice happens at almost every turn, not only after the search process. Throughout the search, parents make choices: about schools to consider, schools to investigate further, schools to remove from the running. Though I will focus next on the moment when a choice has to be made, there are many choices throughout the search process that provide insight into parents' thinking.

Choice Across Parents

Parents gave 102 different reasons for choosing the school their child ultimately attended. These reasons were coded into six categories: "holistic," "academic," "social," "logistic," "administrative," and "other." Holistic reasons focused on the child's overall well-being, including reasons such as "they are thriving where they are" and the child "isn't ready for that kind of school." Academic reasons were those that focused on concerns around classroom teaching and learning. The curriculum being "too basic," "good teachers," and "many learning resources" were all coded as academic reasons. Parents mentioned many social reasons as well, for example, "friends are going there" or the child "knows people there" or the students are "too rough" at that school. Social reasons focused on relational concerns. Logistical reasons were those that pertained to the location, transportation, and cost issues. For example, reasons such as "moving to the area," "too expensive" and "close enough to [the sibling's] school" were all

coded as logistical reasons. In contrast, reasons such as "couldn't meet some of the school's paperwork requirements" or "missed the application deadline" were coded as administrative reasons, as they focused on concerns surrounding how the school was organized and run. Finally, there were a few reasons which did not fit well into any of the other categories. "That school has good lunch" and other reasons were coded into the other category.[8]

Looking only at the data on parents' final school selection, a majority of Weldon parents sited holistic (69%) and academic (58%) reasons for choosing a school. This is consistent with other research which describes parents as concerned with their children's overall development, especially schools' academic characteristics (e.g., Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Schneider et al., 2000). Considerably fewer parents cited social (33%), logistic (27%), administrative (25%), and other (1%) reasons.

Having described the choice process across all the Weldon parents, we now turn to data that suggests parents of varying social-class backgrounds use similar processes to select different schools.

The Choice Process: A Comparative Perspective

As Table 2 summarizes, parents look similar in the processes and reasoning they employed to select schools for their children. Approximately 39% of middle-class and 24% of poor and working-class parents did not conduct a search and, thus, did not move past the predetermination stage. The majority of parents from both social-class groups conducted some type of search (61% for middle-class and 76% for poor and working-class). Those searches culminated in a choice that was most frequently attributed to holistic or academic concerns. Seventy-four percent of middle-class parents and 64% of poor and working-class parents cited

holistic reasons for their final choice. Academic reasons were cited by 48% of middle-class

parents and 68% of poor and working-class parents.

[Table 2 about here]

Despite these similarities, there were differences between parents. For instance, a greater

proportion of poor and working-class parents conducted open searches than middle-class parents.

Thus, poor and working-class parents considered a larger number of schools than more

advantaged parents. Poor and working-class parents also cited academic reasons for choosing

their final school more frequently than did middle-class parents. These differences were not,

however, statistically significant. I will take up one possible explanation for these differences in

the following section.

These similar processes resulted in the selection of different types of schools. Fifty-three

percent of middle-class parents chose a non-failing school as compared with 36% of poor and

working-class parents. Middle-class parents chose selective (74%) and tuition-based (43%)

schools at higher rates than poor and working-class parents (24% chose selective and 24% chose

tuition-based schools).[9] Though a greater proportion of middle-class parents chose non-failing,

selective, and tuition-based schools than poor and working-class parents, we do not know if they

chose better academic schools. Comparative data (e.g., standardized test scores, teacher

qualifications, or graduation rates) were unavailable (to researchers or to parents) for almost half

of the schools parents selected. Thus, it is possible that middle-class parents chose better schools,

but these data only support the claim they chose different schools.

Looking across the data on choice process and final school selection, differences in

choice processes do not explain parents' school selections. In particular, the data do not explain

why poor and working-class parents' chose failing, non-selective, free schools at higher rates

than middle-class parents. Poor and working-class parents sought out schools and reasoned in ways similar to more advantaged parents. They considered more schools and cited academic reasons more often than middle-class parents. Thus the assertion that some parents (i.e., parents of color and less wealthy parents) choose for very different reasons (money, transportation, location) is not supported by these data.[10] Differences in choice processes do not adequately explain choice outcomes.

Note too that the parents in this study were what other researchers have called "choosers" (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 101). They had a history of opting out of their assigned schools and they were deeply engaged in their children's educations. Why then, do they choose failing schools? While this is not a surprise (recall that 97% of parents do not move their children from failing schools), it is nonetheless puzzling. The remainder of the paper develops an explanation for parents' perplexing decisions to leave their children in failing schools. It argues that the make-up of parents' choice sets explains why parents choose the schools they do.

Parents' Choice Sets: The De Facto Schooling Market

Each of the 48 parents nominated schools. Some schools were viable alternatives, others were rejected, and still others were just mentioned once in passing. Together, these schools constitute the radar screen of parental choice, the de facto schooling market in practice. For the purposes of this discussion, I call these schools the parents' "choice sets." As Table 3 makes clear, parents of different social-class backgrounds are not choosing from the same sets of schools. In fact, their radar screens look quite different.

[Table 3 about here]

Though parents considered similar numbers of schools (4.3 v. 3.4), the characteristics of those schools differed significantly. Middle-class parents' choice sets contained, on average, a

greater percentage of non-failing (65% v. 38%), selective (71% v. 37%), and tuition-based schools (50% v. 14%) than did poor and working-class parents' choice sets. In addition, just 16% of poor and working-class parents had at least two non-failing schools in their choice sets, while 58% of middle-class parents had at least two. These differences were statistically significant and consistent with the pattern of parents' final school selections.

In the abstract, parents have access to the same schools; but clearly they do not consider the same schools. The markets from which parents actually chose differed by social class. Class-based choice set differences are likely to have implications for who considers applying to which school. It may mean, for example, that many poor and working class families will not even consider schools that would advantage their children educationally. Conversely, it may mean that middle-class families would only consider selective and tuition-based schools that, in practice, are exclusionary, robbing middle-class children of the learning opportunities associated with interacting with a more diverse student body. Both of these outcomes would be an unanticipated failure of a schooling system founded on the ideal of removing barriers to educational opportunities.

The possibility that choice sets differ by social class is an important finding but it does not help us understand why parents choose from such different sets of schools. In order to understand why choice sets vary, we now turn to an analysis of the ways that context shaped Weldon parents' choice sets. Three contextual factors that shaped parents' choice sets are illustrative, rather than exhaustive.

How Context Shapes Choice Sets

Parents, from the time they are students themselves, are constantly hearing about schools, developing ideas about schools, and watching as friends, colleagues, and family members have

experiences in schools. The historical and evolutionary nature of parents' ideas about schools makes it difficult to pinpoint single events or factors that determine parents' choice sets. Rather than essentializing a complex phenomenon, I suggest three contextual factors that shaped parents' choice sets during the eight months of the study, for they repeatedly surfaced in conversation with parents and during data analysis: social networks, customary attendance patterns, and children's academic success.

Social networks. Previous analyses suggest that social networks can provide parents with many resources for choosing a school (e.g., Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997). This was certainly true of Weldon parents. They used their networks to gather information about particular schools. They used them to learn of new schools. And they used networks to gather multiple perspectives on a single school. With a few exceptions, parents placed a great deal of importance on the value of information gathered through their networks, in particular, their networks made up of other parents.

Over the course of the study, parents mentioned many schools. As they talked about those schools (what they knew and didn't know, what they thought about a given school), I asked how they found out about that school. Of the 48 parents, all but three used their social networks to learn about schools. Ninety-two percent of poor and working-class parents and 94% of middle-class parents used social networks to gather information about schools. Networks provided access to almost two thirds (64%) of all the schools in choice sets. If we remove the schools to which students were assigned (19% of the total), social networks account for 77% of the schools in parents' choice sets. Thus, the vast majority of schools in a choice set were nominated by someone in a parent's social network. Let us consider the characteristics of the schools to which social networks provide access.

Overall, middle-class parents' social networks put them in contact with a higher proportion of non-failing, selective, and tuition-based schools than did poor and working-class parents' networks (See Table 4). These networks provided middle-class parents with 64% non-failing, 90% selective, and 64% tuition-based schools. In contrast, poor and working-class parents' social networks nominated schools that were 48% non-failing, 31% selective, and 14% tuition-based. The differential contact social networks provide is not trivial given the large proportion of schools nominated by social connections.

[Table 4 about here]

Researchers critique parents for a strong and stubborn reliance on their social networks (e.g., Holme, 2002). But the importance of social networks is not limited to schooling. People in all social groups draw on their contacts for information on everything from jobs to child care (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 2000). Businesses know this. The marketplace is crowded with companies angling to establish a unique brand and a positive reputation. People talk. And that talk has marketplace consequences. In the case of school choice, there are very good reasons for parents' reliance on social networks. Networks provide access to insights and judgments about schools unavailable on a state list of average test scores, teacher credentials, and graduation rates. Networks provide access to actual experiences of real people. And perhaps most importantly, social networks can help parents hypothesize about how their child might fare at a specific school. As one Weldon parent explained, "I talk to other parents because they know how Sarah might do at that school."

Social networks are used by parents of all social-class backgrounds. These networks, however, provide differential access to non-failing, selective, and private schools. This finding is

consistent with the differences between middle-class and poor and working-class parents' choice sets.

Customary attendance patterns. With the exception of a child's first school, when a parent chooses a school, she has done so before. Parents' prior choices influence subsequent choices in a variety of ways but at a minimum, prior choices enter parents (and their children) into a customary attendance pattern. Though parents are not bound to select the next school in the customary pattern, many do. The tidal pull is strong.

As mentioned earlier, customary attendance patterns exist in all school sectors. In charter, private, and non-secular schools, there tended to be more than one school in the customary pattern. In neighborhood schools, depending on which area of Weldon parents lived in, there was usually a single school in the customary pattern. Overall, schools in the customary attendance pattern accounted for 49% of the schools in parents' choice sets. While this accounts for a smaller proportion of the choice set schools than do social networks (77%), it is still a sizable proportion and, thus, is an important influence on the make-up of parents' choice sets.

Parents across social classes selected schools in the customary school attendance pattern at similar rates; 52% of middle-class and 56% of poor and working-class parents. Customary attendance patterns did not, however, provide access to the same schools (Table 4). Paralleling the influence of social networks, poor and working-class parents' customary attendance patterns provided little access to non-failing, selective, and tuition-based schools. Schools in their customary attendance patterns were 44% non-failing, 23% selective, and 10% tuition-based. Middle-class customary attendance patterns were made up of schools that were 57% non-failing, 73% selective, and 50% tuition-based.

Like parents' use of social networks, there are good reasons parents consider schools in the customary attendance pattern. Consider two that Weldon parents mentioned repeatedly. First, the schools in the customary attendance pattern are known, they are the familiar. Parents know other parents who have sent their children there. They have heard about those schools over and over again. While there may be some aspects of the schools parents do not like, they know (or feel they know) what those features might be. This reduces the uncertainty inherent in changing schools. Thus, being familiar with a school creates some level of comfort -- even when what is known is not all good -- that unknown, unfamiliar schools cannot.

A second reason parents consider schools in the customary attendance pattern concerns the child's friends. Friendships are important to children. As has been documented elsewhere, when children get older, they have more and more to say about where they want to go to school (David et al., 1994). Overwhelmingly, children want to stay with their friends (David et al., 1994; Ladd & Fiske, 2000). While some might dismiss the desire to stay with one's friends as irrelevant to getting a good education, many parents articulated the belief that a child who has no friends or a child who does not feel comfortable in school can easily turn into a child who does not want to go to school and a child who does not do well academically. As Mrs. Webb explained, "Because if they [children] don't feel comfortable where you put them, they're not going to succeed. You know that." Parents differ on the degree to which they are willing to consider schools outside the customary attendance pattern, but they realize that children's friendships (and possibly academic achievement) are at stake when they consider schools outside the customary attendance pattern.[11]

Customary attendance patterns provide parents ready-made "next schools" that can support a child socially and academically. The schools which make up these patterns differ

between poor and working-class families and middle-class families. The difference between middle-class and poor and working-class customary attendance patterns parallels the differences in choice sets and social networks.

The evidence from social networks and customary attendance patterns suggests that middle-class parents had greater contact than poor and working-class parents with non-failing, selective, and tuition-based schools. These schools were "in the air," part of middle-class parents' social and historical experiences. These were the schools they went to as children, the schools they saw their friends go to, the schools they drove past on the way to a party. Contact with a school through social networks or the customary attendance pattern does not, however, necessarily ensure that a parent will choose one of those schools. Thus, we turn to a third a final factor that shaped parents choice sets: children's academic success.

Children's academic success. Parents of all social classes want their child to be successful in school, although they can hold quite different notions of what constitutes success. They also hold different notions of what children are capable of. Nonetheless, all Weldon parents wanted their children to be successful. As parents constructed their choice sets, they assessed their child's current academic achievement, assessed their child's capacities, and used this information to determine what types of schools were "real options" for a particular child.

Mrs. Carol's thinking is representative. She explained how her son Denzel's prior achievement shaped her thinking about where he should go to high school:

> [If] I'm sending him to public school for free and he's going there and he's not putting forth no effort, then I would really be fighting a losing battle to spend all my money and send him over there [pointing to the private school down the street] and he's still… 'Cause you've got to be motivated to learn, you know, and

that starts from within. And…I'm working on getting him motivated. And that's hard.

Mrs. Carol, like many other parents, made a connection between her child's current achievement and future school. She concluded that it would not make sense to send Denzel to private school; he was unlikely to dramatically change his academic achievement. In her mind, sending him to private school would transform a challenging problem into a challenging and expensive problem. Mrs. Carol's efforts to support Denzel also influenced her assessment of his achievement. She encouraged Denzel to do well in school, but her encouragement has not (yet) produced a change in Denzel's achievement. He remains unmotivated and barely "getting by" with his grades. Thus, Mrs. Carol's understanding of which schools might be suitable for Denzel is based on multiple dimensions of his academic achievement: his performance, his motivation, and her inability to influence either of those. Mrs. Carol did not even consider private or religious schools for Denzel, nor did she consider magnet schools because "with his grades, he wouldn't get in." Mrs. Carol's thinking exemplifies the type of connections that parents made between current achievement and future schools.

Consistent with national trends, poor and working-class Weldon children were less academically successful than their middle-class peers (Table 4).[12] Though parents of all social-class backgrounds were generally positive about their children's academic success, middle-class parents reported higher achievement levels than did poor and working-class parents. Middle class parents had 5.2 greater odds of reporting their child was having a successful academic year as compared with poor and working class parents. Middle class parents also had 7.1 greater odds of reporting their child earned mostly "A's" or "A's and B's," as compared with poor and working class parents.[13]

Though parents might be inflating their children's grades, the connection parents make between children's current achievement and future school is based on parents' perceptions. Selective and tuition-based schools are considered to be "better," "more challenging" schools. If a parent perceives her child is going to be able to handle a more challenging school, she will be more willing to consider selective and tuition-based schools as real options. One example of this occurred with Mrs. Hawill, an African-American mother of 8th grade twins. Mrs. Hawill's daughter, Alicia, was a highly motivated and successful student while her son, Brandon, was less successful and less motivated in school. Mrs. Hawill applied to different schools for the two children. Her choice set for Alicia included a very prestigious private school, three highly selective magnet schools, and one religious school. Her choice set for Brandon included two magnet (one focused on ROTC preparation and the other on technical skills), one charter, and two religious schools. Mrs. Hawill ended up choosing a magnet school with an ambitious academic focus including foreign languages and pre-calculus for Alicia. For Brandon, she selected a small program within a technical magnet school that focused on basic academic and technical skills. Mrs. Hawill constructed the two choice sets for her children based on her understanding of their current academic achievement. Many Weldon parents did the same.

The data suggests that middle-class parents perceived their children to be predominately A students and they considered proportionately more tuition-based and selective schools. Poor and working-class parents perceived their children to be A and B students and they consider fewer tuition-based and selective schools.

To be clear, I am not arguing that all parents make the connection between current achievement and future schools; there were parents who deliberately chose tuition-based schools in an attempt to gain access to better teachers for their child who was struggling academically.

But this was not the norm. Most parents, particularly poor and working-class parents, did not

consider schools that they perceived to be "too hard" or "too competitive" for their children.

Parents explained that they did not want to set their children up for failure. But parents also

believed that if their children wanted to get a good education, the schools they considered could

help them achieve that goal. Many parents shared Mr. Holly's understanding of the achievement

ideology: "Kids can get a good education anywhere. They just have to be willing to work."

Looking across social networks, customary attendance patterns, and academic

achievement, we can begin to see why parents' choice sets differ. Parents used similar processes

(social networks and customary attendance patterns) to develop their choice sets. But those

similar processes did not yield the same results. Middle-class parents' social networks and

customary attendance patterns provided greater contact with non-failing, selective, and tuition-

based schools than did poor and working-class parents' networks and attendance patterns.

Further, middle-class children were, on the whole, more academically successful than poor and

working-class children. This set the stage for parental contact with selective and tuition-based

schools to be converted into action toward one of those schools.

A careful consideration of these three contextual factors reveals an additional insight into

the nature of parents' choice sets. Social networks, customary attendance patterns, and children's

academic achievement are inherently linked to the current distribution of educational

opportunities. This distribution is well documented (i.e., Oakes, 1990). In the case of social

networks, middle class parents' social networks are more likely to include professionals, doctors,

and lawyers, all of whom are likely to have experiences with schools that poor and working class

parents will not (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). With respect to attendance patterns, poor

and working class children already attend schools that are inequitably funded and offer fewer

advanced educational opportunities (Kozol, 1991). Customary attendance patterns will include more of these schools for poor and working-class children than middle-class children. Finally, children of color and white and Asian children do not achieve at the same levels (NCES, 2001a, 2001b). Thus, parents' assessment of their child's achievement hinges on a system that currently advantages white middle-class students (Delpit, 1995; Fordham, 1996; Lareau, 1989, 2003). It is not surprising that social and historical realities are linked to the construction of choice sets, but it does complicate the simplistic portrait of maximizing consumers in an open schooling market in which every school is equally available to all parents.

Discussion

To summarize, the data from this study suggest that differences in choice processes do not explain why poor and working-class parents choose different schools than middle-class parents. Instead, systematic differences in context produce the systematic differences in parents' choice sets. And it is the schools in the choice sets that account, in part, for differences in parents' decisions.

The findings above have both empirical and conceptual implications for choice research. Empirically, the findings suggest that choice sets are the analytic lynchpin necessary to fashion a robust understanding of parents' actions. It is not enough to say parents prefer safe schools or schools that are nearby; those statements only have meaning if we understand the set of schools from which parents are choosing. To date, researchers have assumed that choice sets are determined by geography. But, this study suggests that the choice set is a social, historical construction. If there are vast differences between the schools parents actually consider, future studies must reflect this complexity in order to adequately account for the way that school choice actually happens.

An empirical shift toward collecting data on choice sets and the contextual factors that shape those sets is likely to provide new data that can help us understand the ways that choice policy is currently influencing and might influence our school systems in the future. These constructs can be measured using non-relativistic measures (e.g., the proportion of the choice set that is non-failing) that will facilitate more valid and accurate policy analyses. These may, in turn, lead to more informed policy choices.

Conceptually, this work suggests we can productively move away from a decontextualized understanding of parental choice to one that is rooted in the social and historical contexts that make parents' actions comprehensible. The literature's reliance on an interminable list of school characteristics (e.g., safety, cleanliness, satisfaction) can be replaced by a situated analysis of the choice sets and contextual factors that shape the actual markets within which parents choose. This could also have the potential effect of moving us away from deficit portrayals of parents of color and poor and working-class parents. We have exhausted the insights a deficit model can produce. A shift to a stance that focuses on the ways that parents make sense of the schooling markets around them may produce new conceptual and analytic insights.

In considering the study's limitations, it is important to note that the study's sample is a purposeful one. It is biased toward what other researchers call choosers. Forty of the 48 parents in the study had already opted out of neighborhood schools when the study began. Thus, as we interpret these findings, we must be careful to note that they suggest trends heretofore undocumented. As such, they are preliminary.

The limitation of a purposeful sample, however, is generative. The sample is biased toward choosers and, therefore, likely overestimates the average parent's agency in school

choice. If factors associated with social class play an important role in choosers' choice sets, it is possible that the choice sets of less interested, less ambitious parents may differ even more dramatically along social-class lines. If this group of Weldon parents was satisfied with the selection of failing schools, it is possible that other parents will be also be satisfied with the same schools. These possibilities and others like them raise serious questions about how parents' choices are going to reform our schooling system. It is certainly possible that the choice of incrementally better schools will result in system-wide improvement, but these data suggest we should think carefully about how incremental those choices might be. Studies that make use of representative samples could help us explore these issues further.

In addition to the questions suggested above, this work suggests at least one line of inquiry that might further our understanding of parental choice. This inquiry concerns the possibility of market segmentation. Market segmentation is the notion, introduced by Smith (1956) and well articulated in marketing theory (e.g., Wedel, 2000), that any given market is made up of consumers with heterogeneous needs. Therefore, markets are better conceptualized as groups of consumers with relatively homogeneous preferences. If it is true that particular schools circulate among certain groups of parents and not others, it is possible that the schooling market is segmented and can be treated as such. Such segmentation might have consequences for important educational issues such as parental involvement, student achievement, and student admissions. One can imagine that some schools might deliberately market themselves to specific parents, rather than marketing themselves as a place anyone can get a high quality education. The data from this study cannot speak to these issues but future work might investigate market segmentation in local schooling markets.

Conclusion

Reformers assert that choice is a great equalizer. Schooling markets are seen as open, unbiased, fair. If we simply give parents choice they will select the best school from the set that exists. But this simple portrayal of choice and choice markets obscures much of what marketing and advertising specialists have known for years. We don't all choose from the same set of goods. When purchasing a car, some Americans choose between a Lexus and a BMW, others choose between a Saturn and a Ford. Everyone is free to choose, but consumers' choice sets differ dramatically.

The same is true of school choice. Parents' choices are not the unbounded, free-will, any-school-you-desire, kind of choices that free market advocates suggest. Contextual factors, factors that are directly linked to the current distribution of educational opportunities, shape parents' choice sets. Those factors do not give parents of different social-class backgrounds equal contact with non-failing, selective, and tuition-based schools. This study suggests that choice sets are actual markets from which parents choose schools. If researchers hope to understand why parents choose the schools they do, we must shift our focus away from the market that exists on paper toward the "markets" from which parents select, their choice sets.

Table 1

Description of Parent Sample

School status	School type	Reported family income			Participants
		Low	Med	High	
Failing	Neighborhood public (1 school)	1	3	0	4
	Magnet public (1 school)	1	3	0	4
	Charter (2 schools)	2	4	2	8
	Non-secular private (1 school)	2	0	2	4
	Secular private (1 school)	0	2	0	2
Non-failing	Neighborhood public (1 school)	2	1	1	4
	Magnet public (1 school)	0	4	0	4
	Charter (1 school)	0	4	0	4
	Non-secular private (1 school)	0	2	2	4
	Secular private (2 schools)	0	2	4	6
Homeschooling		0	0	4	4
	22 failing, 22 non-failing	8	25	15	48

Note. The school status and school type apply to the parents at the beginning of the study. Less then $39,000 was considered lower income, $39,000 to $88,000 was considered to be middle income, and over $88,000 was considered to be upper income. These cuts points were determined by dividing the income distribution in Weldon and the inner ring of suburbs into thirds so that one third of people fell into each category.

Table 2

Proportion of Parents Participating in Phases of the Search Process

Phase of search process	All	Poor and working-class	Middle-class
Predetermination			
No Search	.31	.24	.39
Search			
Closed	.23	.24	.22
Open	.46	.52	.39
Choice			
Holistic	.69	.64	.74
Academic	.58	.68	.48
Social	.33	.36	.30
Logistic	.27	.32	.22
Administrative	.25	.32	.17
n	48	25	23

Note. Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between features of the search phase and social class group. * $p < .05$

Table 3

Characteristics of Mean Parent's Choice Set, by Social Class

Choice Set Characteristic	Parents			
	Poor and working-class	n	Middle-class	n
Non-failing [a]	.38	25	.65*	19
	(.37)		(.38)	
Selective [a]	.37	25	.71**	23
	(.32)		(.17)	
Tuition-based [a]	.14	25	.50**	23
	(.29)		(.40)	
At least 2 non-failing schools [b]	.16	25	.58**	23
Number of schools [a]	4.3	25	3.4	23
	(3.0)		(2.3)	

Note. [a] Two-tailed independent t-tests assessed the difference between mean proportions. [b] Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between the choice set characteristic and social-class group. Standard deviations are in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 4

Characteristics of Mean Parent's Social Network, Customary Attendance Pattern, and Child's

Academic Success, by Social Class

Contextual factors	Poor and working-class	n	Middle-class	n
Social networks				
Schools non-failing [a]	.48	23	.64	18
	(.32)		(.43)	
Schools selective [a]	.31	23	. 90**	22
	(.36)		(.19)	
Schools tuition-based [a]	.14	23	.64**	22
	(.31)		(.42)	
Customary attendance pattern				
Schools non-failing [a]	.44	24	.57	15
	(.47)		(.49)	
Schools selective [a]	.23	24	.73**	15
	(.36)		(.37)	
Schools tuition-based [a]	.10	24	.50**	15
	(.29)		(.46)	
Child's academic success				
A or "mostly" A student [b]	.40	25	.83**	23
B student [b]	.48	25	.17**	23

Successful academic year [b]	.56	25	.87*	23
Students retained [a]	.12	25	.00	23

Note. [a] Two-tailed independent t-tests assessed the difference between mean proportions. [b] Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between the contextual factor and social-class group. Standard deviations are in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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[1] The distinction between failing and non-failing is weak, but is the best we have. There are many complications. We do not have a single metric against which all schools are judged. If one assumes that standardized tests can measure school quality, private and religious schools need not participate in such tests and thus we do not have access to those scores. Even if schools participate, scores are not publicly available to researchers and parents. A final problem with the failing/non-failing distinction is its validity. Because the criteria upon which states judge schools are themselves political objects, they may or may not be valid measures of school quality. Despite all this, NCLB imposes severe consequences on failing public schools. So while this distinction is not analytically strong, it is a starting point.

[2] Less then $39,000 was considered lower income, $39,000 to $88,000 was considered to be middle income, and over $88,000 was considered to be upper income. These cut points were determined by dividing the income distribution in Weldon and the inner ring of suburbs into thirds so that one third of people fell into each category.

[3] Parents in magnet and neighborhood schools were first contacted by mail. Interested parents returned a post card with their address and phone number on it. Addresses were then associated with census data and the rest of the sampling procedure was followed.

[4] Homeschooling parents were recruited to the study by email, through their homeschooling organizations. They were enrolled in the study on a first come, first served basis.

[5] There have been three approaches to college choice research, social psychological, economic studies, and sociological status attainment studies. For a full description of these perspectives' contributions, see McDonough (1997).

[6] I define social class by the relative prestige and skills associated with parental occupation. If a parent did not work on a consistent basis they were classified as being poor. Parents who held routine, semi-routine, lower supervisory and technical occupations were classified as working-class. Parents who held professional, managerial, and intermediate occupations were classified as being middle-class. Similar to Lareau (2003), only three divisions in social class were used due to the small sample size. If there were two parents of differing occupational status, the higher of two was used to classify the family.

[7] Assignment to neighborhood schools began during the common school movement in the 1840's (Cremin, 1982).

[8] Parents discussed safety in different ways. On surveys "safety" is a comprehensive category that obscures the subtlety of the ways in which parents use the term. For example, some parents talked about unsafe schools as places that threaten their child's ability to develop, socially and intellectually. Other parents discussed unsafe schools as socially chaotic places in which their child might get "mixed-up" in the wrong crowd. Depending on the context in which the parent discussed their concerns, "safety" was coded in the social, holistic or administrative category.

[9] Selective schools are schools that have competitive entrance requirements, require an entrance exam or a financial commitment beyond paying taxes. Magnet, secular, non-secular, and homeschools fit into this category.

[10] This finding, while supported for this sample, may not apply to the larger population of poor and working-class parents. Most of the poor and working-class parents in this study (84%) have previously opted out of their assigned school. Thus, these are parents who have a history of overcoming constraints to choose a non-assigned school. In that sense, they are not typical.

[11] Some parents deliberately looked for schools outside the customary attendance pattern because those schools offered a change in friends. This change, depending on parents' preferences, can be a positive characteristic of an uncustomary school.

[12] Their success was measured both by the grades parents' reported as well as parents' overall assessment of the child's academic success in the current school year.

[13] Odds ratios are calculated from tabular marginal frequencies. They are used as an effect size indicator for categorical data patterns.