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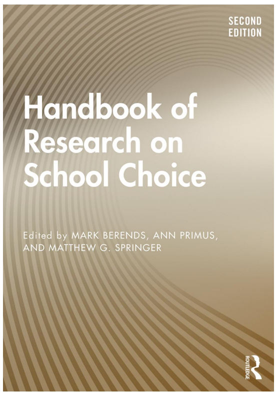

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PARENT DECISION-MAKING AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Huriya Jabbar and Sarah Winchell Lenhoff

School choice policies give parents the power to decide where their children attend school, rather than assign children to schools based on where they live. This state-sponsored "empowerment" means that parent decision-making is central to understanding who choice policies are serving, in what ways, and to what ends. The actions and inactions of parents in a school choice marketplace play a critical role in shaping the programs available, the demographic makeup of school enrollments, and the future decisions of parents and policymakers. In this chapter, in which we use the term "parents" to describe any adult caregiver who is responsible for making school-related decisions, we review the literature on decision-making theory, parents' preferences, and the ways in which the policy context shapes parent choices.

We conceive of parent decision-making in school choice environments broadly. While much of our analysis explores research on parents who enroll their children in schools of choice, we also examine the limited research on the intersections between parent school choice decisions and parent decisions about where to live, how to navigate the politics of school choice, and whether to enroll in neighborhood schools. These areas of research, while underdeveloped, offer the field new questions to explore variation in parent decision-making across geographic, policy, and social contexts. We also consider how parent decision-making is enacted differently across choice mechanisms, such as charter schools, voucher systems, and open enrollment.

We review research that spans the methodological spectrum, highlighting essential or particularly vivid studies that will give the reader context for understanding key findings. We focus primarily on research on schools in the United States. Our review answers four questions:

1. How do school choice theories conceptualize parent decision-making?
2. How do parents make school choice decisions?
3. What do parents choose?
4. How does the policy context shape parent choices?

Decision-Making Theory

Assumptions about school choice rely on a theory of parent decision-making, or how families select schooling options. Research in this area has been informed by economic models of decision-making, particularly rational choice theory (see Chapters 1 and 3 in this volume). This model suggests that parents have clear preferences and constraints, and that they work for their family's self-interest to maximize their utility, satisfaction, or benefit (Betts & Loveless, 2005). In this context, parents, as rational actors, can evaluate their schooling options completely, making complex calculations involving their preferences and outcome probabilities.

Researchers use rational choice theory because, despite its over-simplified view of decision-making behavior, its assumptions and abstractions have often generated accurate predictions (Friedman, 1953). Education researchers in particular often use available, objective measures of quality, such as student test scores or graduation rates, to examine the rational choices parents make. This is in part because policymakers hope that expanding school choice policies will allow families to select schools that are better in quality, improving outcomes for students over time.

However, research increasingly demonstrates that the rational choice model is insufficient, because it does not fully consider context, the role of social networks, differing preferences by social groups, and biased measurement tools for school quality. Thus, it does not explain the way parents make choices, nor does it adequately capture what parents care about when making a choice, which may include harder-to-measure, qualitative aspects, such as school culture or sense of safety. Therefore, parents may be acting rationally, but not in the ways that many researchers have assumed.

In recent years, research in psychology and economics has highlighted the cognitive complexity of decision-making (Jabbar, 2011; Lavecchia, Liu, & Oreopoulos, 2014). This research suggests that, in contrast to mainstream economic assumptions about behavior, people's preferences are not always consistent or well defined (Camerer, Loewenstein, & Rabin, 2003), and the *contexts* of choices matter in determining the outcome. People use heuristics, or shortcuts, and they are "cognitive misers" who do not consider all choices at once (Simon, 1984; Kahneman, 2013).

Instead of rational choice, researchers have proposed a model of *bounded rationality* (Simon, 1955), which posits that parents rarely have the capacity to carefully consider all schools and weigh all schooling alternatives against one another. Instead, they "satisfice," selecting schools that they deem reasonable from the options they are able to consider (Bell, 2009a). One key insight has identified the "paradox of choice" (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004; Iyengar & Kamenica, 2010; Choi, Laibson, & Madrian, 2011), when the desire for more options conflicts with the desire for simplification. While expanding options for families theoretically improves parental satisfaction with schools, too many options can cause people to "freeze" or behave irrationally (DellaVigna, 2007). Parents may be concerned that they missed a better opportunity because they were not able to closely investigate every option (Schwartz, 2004), possibly leading to lower satisfaction than if they had to choose among a small group of schools or were zoned to a neighborhood school.

Further challenging the rational choice model is research showing that neither affluent nor poor parents behave as the model would suggest. While research used to focus only on poor families' decisions, which could inadvertently imply that *they* were irrational, studies of middle-class families have shown that they also make "irrational" decisions and draw on limited information to evaluate their options. Qualitative research has suggested that affluent parents often make affective decisions based on atmosphere, impression, and climate, and that they know little about a school's academic programs before choosing it (Holme, 2002; Bell, 2009a). Even when parents say they prioritize academics, many actually select schools based on race and poverty demographics, as one study of parents' internet searches revealed (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Without any data, these parents tend to assume that low-income schools serving large numbers of students of color are unsafe, dangerous, or of poor quality, and they avoid these schools (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). A recent study found that high-income suburban parents do rely heavily on networks, but also often "do their research" on schools, weighing factors such as teacher effectiveness, academic quality, and distance (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016). This contrasts with some prior studies that found that middle-class families seemed to rely more heavily on information from networks rather than independent research (Lareau & Goyette, 2014).

While parents' processes of selecting schools are remarkably similar across social classes, the schools that end up in their choice sets vary in quality due to the geography of opportunity, school funding disparities, and transportation constraints (Bell, 2009b; Villavicencio, 2013; Phillippo & Griffin, 2016). For example, Bell's (2009a) qualitative study of 48 families' choice processes found that differences in the quality of schools that parents ultimately selected were due not to the process of choice—both low-income and middle-income parents relied on their social networks to obtain information about schools—but due to the schools they actually considered. Middle-class families had a greater percentage of nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools in their choice sets than did poor and working-class parents. All parents' choice sets were bounded in some way, and those bounds paralleled existing boundaries of social inequity.

This research pushes against both a rational model of parent decision-making and a view of poor parents, particularly, as irrational or not making the "right" decisions (i.e., selecting the schools with the highest test scores). Instead, the poor are simply subject to the same cognitive constraints as everyone else, but they have less margin for error. As Cooper (2007) found in her study of Black mothers' choices in a Midwestern city, the women were not irrational; they were rational, but their choices were *positioned*, shaped by race, class, and gender. Instead of an individualized, self-interested notion of choice rooted in market theory, these mothers exercised choice as a way to engage in collective action, political work, and resistance, and were looking out for not just their own children, but others' as well.

In sum, research in economics, psychology, and education has complicated the rational choice model, highlighting the ways in which parents' decisions are highly contextualized and nuanced. Next, we turn to what parents seek when selecting schools.

Parent Preferences and Constrained Choices

A key goal of school choice policy is to encourage better matching between families' needs and schools' offerings, with more tailored options for students. When parents can choose schools, schools will experience pressure to improve. This section will review the literature on *how* parents choose schools, *what* they choose, and *who* chooses or participates in a school choice marketplace, revealing the ways in which parents' choices are constrained by both individual and societal factors.

How Parents Make Decisions

As we have established, parent decision-making about schooling for their children is morally and cognitively complex (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Wilson, 2015). Parents have different resources, social networks, knowledge, and time, all of which further enable or constrain their ability to make a choice that matches their preferences (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Bell, 2009a; Harris & Larsen, 2015; Altenhofen et al., 2016).

Research has identified differences in what parents say they want in a school (their *expressed* preferences), and the schools they actually select (their *revealed* preferences). Schneider and Buckley (2002) monitored parents' search behavior as they accessed online information about schools in Washington, D.C. (thus working against the bias of socially acceptable responses from parents in interviews or surveys). They found that, although parents said they did not consider race as a primary factor, 30 percent looked at student demographics early in their search and did not look at information about teachers or school quality, even when they stated that academics was a strong factor in their decisions. Some did look at test scores, but less often than one would expect based on how important they stated these were in their decisions. Furthermore, the study found evidence of different preferences by groups. Parents with higher education levels were more likely to care about demographic information and look at test scores than parents with lower education levels.

A growing body of sociological and critical work exploring the parent choice process thus has shown that, as revealed above, choice is *positioned* (Cooper, 2005), and that choice is highly subjective, emotional, value-laden, stratified by social class, and shaped by social networks, perceptions, social capital, and identity (Holme, 2002; Bell, 2009a; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Altenhofen et al., 2016). Indeed, choice works differently for parents based on their position in society. How privileged, resourced, and powerful parents are influences their ability to navigate and succeed within the dominant social structure (André-Bechely, 2005; Cooper, 2005). Parents are generally in support of school choice and their ability to exit local schools, but they face barriers based on information, structures, and practicality that limit their options (Ellison & Aloe, 2018).

The gendered impacts of school choice stem from intrahousehold dynamics and the fact that women comprise the vast majority of school choosers (André-Bechely, 2005; Power, 2006; Cooper, 2007; Goswami, 2015). In addition, Power (2006) argued that the misogynistic nature of school choice debates shifts the blame for social and educational inequities to women, particularly middle-class women, portraying them as selfish and hypocritical agents in the reproduction of inequalities when they seek out educational opportunities for their children. This burden works in reverse for poor women, who are blamed for not choosing "better" schools for their children or perceived as not prioritizing education. Choice thus shifts fault and responsibility from the public sphere to the private, gendered sphere of parent choice. Expanding school choice then may also increase women's share of the burden of household decision-making.

In these ways, individual parent decisions can drive greater stratification in settings with school choice, in part due to the decisions of more affluent or educated white families and in part due to a lack of sufficient information for low-income families or families of color to make high-quality choices.

What Parents Choose

Parents ultimately choose schools based on the same factors they weigh in the decision-making process, including school academic proficiency or test scores, racial demographics, safety, location, values, and discipline. Here, too, their preferences vary by race and income (Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992, 2005; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Hausman & Goldring, 2000; Holme, 2002; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). Parents choose when they are both *pushed* to consider alternative options due to conditions at their child's current school, and *pulled* to more attractive options due to features of the schools of choice. In a synthesis of data from five qualitative studies (Cooper, 2005, 2007; Neild, 2005; Pedroni, 2007; Pattillo, 2015) that examined the decision-making of low-income families of color, Ellison and Aloe (2018) found that *push* factors—including perceptions of disorder and unsafe conditions, overcrowding, low levels of resources, low academic achievement, and teachers' racial biases—were stronger than *pull* factors, such as perceptions of a positive school culture, smaller class sizes, fewer disciplinary issues, and challenging and specialized curriculum. Schneider and Buckley (2002) also proposed a two-stage model of choice, where parents were first driven by push factors to decide to exit a school and then selected among the alternatives.

As with the parent decision-making process, research examining what schools parents ultimately choose finds different preferences by social class. For example, a recent study of parents' schooling decisions in the decentralized, market-driven school system in post-Katrina New Orleans found that features such as extracurricular activities and distance from the school mattered at least as much as academic quality (Harris & Larsen, 2015). Low-income families were less likely to select schools based on academic outcomes, and were more constrained based on practical considerations, such as the need to send their children to schools close to home, have siblings attend the same school, and have extended school days to accommodate work schedules. Although there is evidence that overall school quality has improved in New Orleans, these differences in preferences or, more likely, access to schools with higher academic outcomes, raise concerns about equity in a system with expansive school choice.

Given the limited methods parents use to evaluate schools and the burdens of choosing, they can end up selecting schools that are more segregated by race and class. One study of parents in New York City found that they chose schools based on student characteristics—seeking schools with higher-achieving peers for their children—and not the school's effectiveness in terms of improving student test scores (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg, & Walters, 2017). A study in North Carolina found that charter schools increased segregation in the state, partly because of the asymmetric preferences of White families and Black families, with Black students transferring to charter schools that were more segregated than their neighborhood public schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007). This pattern holds, on average, across 40 states and Washington, D.C. (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, Wang, & Orfield, 2012). Similarly, in upstate New York, White families are more likely to exercise choice as the minority population increases, thereby increasing segregation (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2005). Researchers have thus raised concerns that individual choices can drive stratification across lines of race and class (Scott, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013).

Studies examining middle-class families' choices have highlighted how parental anxiety among the middle class can be intensified through school choice (Cucchiara, 2013a). Other studies have examined the decisions of middle-class families who go "against the grain," opting for diverse schools or to remain in the urban core, in part due to their belief that their cultural capital can compensate for any gap in school quality (Kimelberg, 2014). Findings from research examining campaigns to retain or attract White and middle-class families in urban public schools revealed, however, that these programs and policies could reproduce inequalities and, in some cases, exacerbate segregation by pushing out low-income families from these schools and by contributing to neighborhood gentrification (Cucchiara, 2013b; Kimelberg & Billingham, 2013; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Who Chooses

In addition to what parents choose, it is important to examine *who chooses*. Parents do not have equal access to school choices and face policy and institutional barriers as they attempt to exercise choice. In fact, researchers have noted that not all families are in the "marketplace" of school choice. Some parents are "non-choosers." For various reasons, such as satisfaction with their current schooling arrangements or lack of information, they are not making decisions about school options. Further, they tend to have lower socioeconomic status than active choosers (Goldring & Hausman, 1999).

Among families who do choose schools, there are also differences by the type of choice program they choose as well as their socioeconomic status. As noted earlier, charter schools tend to be more racially segregated than traditional public schools (Frankenberg et al., 2012). In Texas, for example, Black students are more likely to attend a charter than students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007). At the same time, there is evidence that White families are more likely to enroll in charter schools when public school districts are more integrated—a form of white flight to charter schools (Renzulli & Evans, 2005).

Regarding school vouchers, researchers have found that even programs that are limited to low-income students sometimes do not serve the students who are most disadvantaged (i.e., the lowest-achieving or with special needs). Overall, the research that has examined different stages of the choice process—rates of application and use of vouchers—is mixed. In Milwaukee, applicants tend to be higher-achieving than non-applicants, but not higher-income (Chakrabarti, 2013), with high attrition rates amongst the most disadvantaged students (Cowen, Fleming, Witte, & Wolf, 2012). Compared to voucher users, families who are offered but do not use their voucher are disproportionately lower-income (Wisconsin State Legislative Audit Bureau, 2012; Chakrabarti, 2013), minority, English language learners, with special needs children (Plucker, Muller, Hansen, Ravert, & Make, 2006; Wisconsin State Legislative Audit Bureau, 2012), and with parents who are more often unemployed, part-time workers, and single (Feldman et al., 2014). In Cleveland, a city that has a non-means tested program that allows any student to enroll, voucher users are higher-income when compared to students who receive but do not use a voucher (Paul, Legan, & Metcalf, 2007). There is little data, however, about *why* rates of voucher use are lower for relatively more disadvantaged students.

Similar patterns emerge when considering the take-up of open enrollment, or interdistrict choice, policies, which allow students to cross district boundaries to enroll in nonresident traditional public school districts. In Colorado and Minnesota, where there are state-mandated open enrollment laws and few restrictions on enrollment, students leave high-performing districts at a greater rate than they leave low-performing districts, but the districts they enroll in are higher-performing (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011). While many early studies found that more advantaged students were most likely to use open enrollment to attend schools in nonresident districts (Fossey, 1994; Doering, 1998), recent studies have found that Black and low-income students were more likely to use open enrollment (Lavery & Carlson, 2014; Cowen & Creed, 2017). These conflicting findings suggest that open enrollment patterns vary by state, region, and time period. When families use open enrollment, they tend to enroll in more advantaged districts than those where they live (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999; Reback, 2008; Holme & Richards, 2009; Welsch, Statz, & Skidmore, 2010). These patterns can reinforce or exacerbate school segregation.

Overall, the literature suggests that parent choices are constrained. Choice alone cannot guarantee equity or overcome broader structural inequities when the quality and distribution of schools is so unequal to begin with. Next, we explore how these parental processes and preferences are further influenced or constrained by policy and social context.

Policy and Social Context of School Choice

Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball (1994b) proposed the "landscape" as an alternative heuristic to understand how the policy context shapes parent decision-making. Like the experience of surveying an outdoor scene, parents—given their position—examine what they can see, draw on all of their personal resources, and make intuitive and tentative judgments that may or may not lead to a school choice decision. In this context, parent decision-making shapes the schooling experiences of all children, whether their parents make explicit school choices or not. Here we examine the research on the intersections of school choice policy and parent decision-making, revealing the complexity of choosing from the landscape of choices.

School choice policy constructs and intervenes in education markets in multiple ways. Districts and states set the "rules of the game": They open schools of choice, close them, and otherwise oversee them by, for example, ensuring that they meet minimum quality standards (Levin, 2012). School choice policy has also emerged alongside a battery of reforms that use testing to both hold schools accountable and to provide information to parents and the public about school quality (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009). These test-based measures, which are highly correlated with student demographic makeup, further shape the landscape of choices for parents and constrain their ability to consider schools that do not fare well under school grading schemes. Thus, this policy infrastructure converges with the status quo of schools and neighborhoods. Despite the large body of work on how parents choose or how schools of choice operate, however, the research is comparatively limited on the role of the policy context in choice environments, variation among different approaches to governing markets, and how that variation influences parent decision-making.

The regulatory environment around school choice, usually determined at the state level, can constrain the choices parents are able to make, with implications for equitable access and the resulting patterns of enrollment in a school choice marketplace. For instance, some state policies limit charter schools to certain cities or regions (Shober, Manna, & Witte, 2006), require districts to allow open enrollment for students who attend low-performing schools, or restrict access to interdistrict choice when parent decisions would increase segregation (Education Commission of the States, 2017). Still other states empower local governmental entities with making choice policy, creating variation in choice options even within regions. This can have an exclusionary effect on some families (Cobb & Glass, 2009; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). For instance, Michigan law permits local school districts to determine whether they will offer open enrollment to nonresidents, how many, and from which counties (Arsen et al., 1999; Lenhoff, 2018), creating differing choice opportunities for parents and therefore shaping the landscape from which they choose.

Politics and social policy influence choice options, particularly as they intersect with social inequalities in communities and regions. Despite the theoretical promise of school choice to sever the link between home and school, research has found that advantage tends to beget advantage, with the most privileged students benefiting the most from school choice policy, ensuring that schools are still significantly unequal (Holme, Finnigan, & Diem, 2016).

Interdistrict transfer plans provide a useful example of the ways in which the policy context shapes parent decision-making. For example, Black students in St. Louis schools, under court order, may enroll in suburban school districts mostly populated by White students. Many Black parents in the city do choose to send their children to school in the suburbs, but the sociopolitical and geographic situation means that they are also choosing to have their children travel long distances to schools where they may be ostracized by students and teachers (Wells & Crain, 1997). While parents who choose not to send their children to suburban schools may be characterized as not preferring higher-performing schools, their preferences must also be considered within the policy and demographic context of available options.

Conversely, in a study of the Boston voluntary interdistrict transfer plan, Orfield et al. (1998) found that the parents of students who chose to transfer to suburban schools were more affluent and more highly educated than those who chose not to transfer. Rational choice theory might suggest that these parents prefer academic quality more than low-income parents. However, when understood within the social context of choosing, in which school choice policy has not dismantled the stark class and race divides between schools in adjacent districts, the costs for some families may be greater than others. These social costs, such as racial isolation, create inequitable landscapes from which parents can choose.

Controlled choice programs represent the goals of desegregation, choice, and school improvement within a policy framework of school choice. Greene (2005) cautioned that policy cannot “force” integration, because people, particularly White and higher-income parents, will move to more homogenous areas, evading schools with more diverse student populations. Yet, the mass exodus of Whites from city centers to the suburbs occurred in cities even without mandatory busing (Wells & Crain, 1997). As Margonis and Parker (1995) argued, racialized patterns of enrollment cannot be viewed as solely the result of individual choice, particularly as Whites have displayed intense racial solidarity through containment policies, such as redlining, deed restrictions, and zoning restrictions on low-cost housing.

State legislation can affect how equitable charter schools are, particularly in relation to racial integration and nondiscriminatory access by race and class. Wamba and Ascher (2003) found that, while about a third of state charter school laws required charters to mirror the racial balance of their districts, three common provisions in charter law indirectly constrained access to charters for some parents: private-charter conversions, for-profit management companies that avoid high-cost students, and limited mandates for the provision of transportation to school. There are other ways in which state policy can create opportunities for some parents to exercise choice. For instance, so-called parent trigger laws were created to empower parents in low-performing schools to vote to have their local public school turned into a charter school, with the explicit aim of improving the school's outcomes. While research on the effects of parent trigger laws is slim, studies have shown that they are likely to privilege the civic will of some parents over others because of their reliance on market-based economic theories with narrow criteria to judge school quality (Scott, 2013; Feuerstein, 2015; Rogers, Lubienski, Scott, & Welner, 2015; see also Chapter 24 in this volume). In this way, the policy environment creates opportunities for parents to make decisions about schools through political advocacy, which in turn shapes the landscape of choices for all parents in the community.

Similarly, program policies and requirements can influence parents' access to and take-up of school vouchers. Many programs require parents to provide their own transportation, which can be costly and inconvenient. In Washington D.C., for example, researchers found that most of the applicants lived in the lowest-income neighborhoods, where there are fewer participating private schools, which meant that these students had to travel long distances in order to attend certain participating private schools (Feldman et al., 2014). Whether voucher policies are means-tested, hold participating private schools accountable through initial screening and eligibility as well as student performance on standardized tests, or allow participating schools to charge extra fees for uniforms or books has important implications for access and equity in voucher programs.

Geography also shapes the landscape of school choices and constrains the options parents have. Charter schools, for instance, are not limited by local district boundaries and assignment zones and therefore can make intentional decisions about where to locate (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). Local geographies and choice policies shape the demand for particular forms of school choice, as parents with more social capital opt in more frequently than parents who live in less affluent neighborhoods (Lubienski & Lee, 2017; Yoon, Lubienski, & Lee, 2018). At the same time, parents vary in their level of preference for physically close schools, as they use place-based signifiers to determine whether and how geography will influence their school selection, and they are likely to strongly consider the customary enrollment patterns of schools available to them (Bell, 2009a, 2009b). Because low-income parents are more likely to be constrained by geography, and their landscape of choices is more likely to be low-performing, parent decision-making must be viewed as constructed by the interaction between individual preferences and the policy context in which they make choices.

While policy and sociopolitical context can explicitly shape the landscape of choices available to parents, the mechanisms and information parents need to make a choice also have an important influence on which schools are chosen by whom. While *too little* information may be a barrier for some families (Ellison & Aloe, 2018), researchers have also suggested that *too much* information, a lack of appropriate information, or too many options can also serve as barriers to making "good" schooling decisions (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). Parents are "hungry for information" (Neild, 2005, p. 294), but the *choice architecture*—the presentation and structure of choices—and the *framing of information* influence whether parents can make optimal choices.

For instance, researchers have found positive results in experiments that share targeted materials to low-income choosers across the educational spectrum, including expert guidance about where to apply to college (Hoxby & Turner, 2013), text-message reminders about steps to enroll in college (Castleman & Page, 2015), simplified "fact sheets" on school options in New York City (Corcoran, Jennings, Cohodes, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2017), simplified booklets in Milwaukee and Washington, D.C. (Valant, 2014), and information on alternatives to the neighborhood school in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). In all of these cases, the information was available, but it was often too complex and difficult to navigate, buried on websites or contained in a large book of information on every schooling option. When parents receive better-targeted information, they are assigned schools with higher test scores (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008) and higher graduation rates (Corcoran et al., 2017). Yet, the diversity of K–12 informational websites shows that there is not consensus on the best way to present information to parents (Glazerman, 2017). And with widespread school marketing efforts (Lubienski, 2007), the framing (or manipulation) of choices has important implications for where families enroll. (See Chapter 26 in this volume.)

Implications and Future Research

In this chapter, we summarized how parents navigate school choice policies and, in particular, the barriers and constraints they face during the process. Advocates argue that choice will empower parents, but we find that inequities by race and social class limit access and empowerment. Indeed, the notion of empowerment is complex. Parents can be empowered beyond just the ability to select a school through, for example, engagement and voice in decision-making, advocacy, and organizing (Scott, 2013). Or they can "opt out" of standardized testing (Wilson, Hastings, & Moses, 2017).

Research suggests that parents are not necessarily aligned with the ideological view that choice *is* empowerment, even if they take advantage of school choice policies. They would prefer that their local schools have the same educational opportunities available as those accessible by more affluent families (Ellison & Aloe, 2018). An emphasis on choice as empowerment also shifts the responsibility for education quality and equity away from the state and toward private actors who may prioritize private benefits over public goals when they make decisions (Bowe et al., 1994a, 1994b; Scott, 2013). Families have differential access and ability to take advantage of choice options, so this approach to empowerment via choice can simultaneously disempower parents, emphasizing their role as consumers voting with their feet, rather than citizens exercising voice through democratic engagement (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012).

Despite the growing body of literature on how parents choose and what they value, there are still areas where further research is needed. First, we do not understand the implications of choice for health outcomes, stress, or a greater burden on the poor. There are unintended psychological consequences when consumers have too many options, such as anxiety or doubt about the decision (Schwartz, 2004). Anxiety is greater when making high-stakes decisions like schooling for a child (Attewell, 2001; Roda & Wells, 2013), and school choice can intensify it (Cucchiara, 2013a). Persistent anxiety is related to mental health and physical illnesses, such as heart disease, chronic respiratory disorders, and gastrointestinal conditions (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015). Given that low-income families are already at greater risk for poor health outcomes (Smith, 1999; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997), the anxiety produced by choosing may increase the costs they bear when making school choices. Research is needed to investigate this phenomenon.

Second, school choice policies play out very differently in different contexts, yet we need more research on how specific policies influence equity and access in school choice. An examination of the variations in market contexts would be useful, particularly their regulatory environments and their differential effects on outcomes of school choice policies. Researchers have pointed out that school choice does not inherently generate positive outcomes or massive inequities; the design of these policies matters (Levin, 2012), particularly for their impacts on diversity (Scott, 2005). Research is needed to examine how parental preferences vary across different policy contexts, and what particular elements of policies help to reduce or exacerbate inequities in families' access to school choice.

Third, given shifting demographics in urban settings, more research is needed to understand how gentrification influences school choices, for gentrifiers and locals, in the short and long term. For example, recent research has found that when school choice policies expand, college-educated White households are more likely to gentrify communities of color, perhaps because they do not have to attend the neighborhood school (Pearman & Swain, 2017). Therefore, school choice has the potential to increase gentrification and push out low-income families of color. Furthermore, as a result of inner-city gentrification, inner-ring suburbs are becoming more diverse. Understanding how these contexts shape parental choice can be relevant to inform policy in urban and suburban settings.

Finally, the U.S. has entered a new era of politics, with a growing interest in racial equity and new opportunities for policy change to ameliorate existing inequities. At the same time, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has emphasized further deregulation and unfettered school choice policies. Research is needed to trace the local and national politics of school choice as it evolves in this new context, perhaps forging new coalitions or fracturing existing ones, and how this shapes policies that influence parents and families. There may be renewed opportunities for policy change related to desegregation, perhaps through controlled school choice, or for progressive visions of school choice (Brighouse, 1996), which emphasize integration and equity, to compete with market-oriented versions.

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