

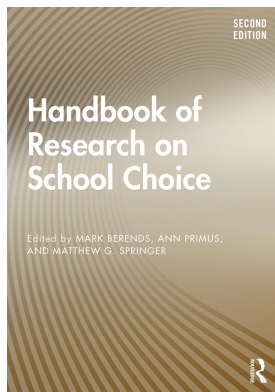
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3

SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL CHOICE

Mark Berends

As the school choice movement continues to expand, so too does the research examining whether or not it is doing what it aims to do—that is, improve students’ academic, educational, social, economic, emotional, and civic outcomes. Much of the research to date has neglected school structures and processes as they relate not only to student outcomes but also to the three key aspects of schools that the choice movement intends to improve—autonomy, innovation, and accountability (see Berends, Waddington, & Schoenig, 2019). Central to advocates’ argument for choice is that these aspects of reform will produce changes in organizational conditions that promote learning, curriculum, and instruction, which in turn will lead to improved student outcomes. Moreover, the argument goes, practices and conditions related to autonomy, innovation, and accountability will differ across schools (and school types), thus responding to parental and community preferences and further promoting student achievement, attainment, civic, and social–emotional outcomes. Notwithstanding this foundational claim of school choice advocates, conclusive evidence remains elusive.

To further our theoretical understanding of school choice, this chapter addresses several social perspectives. It is a revision to the chapter I wrote for the first edition of this volume with updates about what we have learned over the last several decades. I begin by focusing on the rational choice perspective, or what economists call market theory, and then consider choice from the sociological frameworks of institutional, social capital, and social organization of schooling perspectives. After reviewing some of the evidence on school choice, I make the case that future research should examine the variation among schools of choice because extant research reveals widely heterogeneous effects on student outcomes. Although I have been making this argument for several years, researchers on school choice are just starting to pay attention to this heterogeneity (Lee, Mills, & Wolf, 2018; Waddington & Berends, 2018; Betts & Tang, 2019). Toward this end, examining the social structures and processes within schools, classrooms, and families will shed light on the conditions under which choice may (or may not) help students succeed. Many forms of choice can be examined from this social organization of schooling perspective, including charter, magnet, and private schools; vouchers and tuition tax credits; homeschooling; and inter- and intradistrict choice.

Rational Choice or Market Theory Perspective

Many reformers maintain that market-style mechanisms of consumer choice and competition between autonomous schools will encourage diverse and innovative approaches (Friedman,

1955, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990), resulting in a “rising tide” that improves all schools (Hoxby, 2003, p. 287). The assumption is that as school choice undercuts bureaucratic political control of public education, it provides educators in schools of choice the opportunity and motivation to experiment with new organizational and instructional strategies for improving student achievement.

The mechanism of school choice gives parents the opportunity to pursue non-traditional schooling options for their children. Proponents argue that providing this freedom not only diversifies educational opportunities, but also creates incentives for traditional public schools to improve through increased market competition for services (see Chapters 11 and 16 of this volume). For example, Chubb and Moe (1990) have argued that, as choice allows market-like competition to increase and bureaucratic structures to decline, it provides parents with greater opportunities for home-school interaction and schools with greater openness to parents’ demands. Supporters of de-bureaucratization contend that parents, especially low-income and parents of students of color, will be less intimidated by the schools and more willing to make their needs known to school personnel, resulting in school processes that will lead to improved student outcomes (see Walberg & Bast, 2003).

Central to the market orientation of the school choice mechanism is rational choice or market theory, which suggests individuals will consistently choose alternatives that they believe maximize the utility of their preferences (see Becker, 1986; Coleman, 1990, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Broadly speaking, rational choice theory (RCT) posits that individuals act out of self-interest; that is, they act only in terms of their personal preferences, and are rational in that they methodically order all choices from most to least desired. From a sociological perspective, RCT is focused on the behavior of social systems, implying a back-and-forth focus on behavior at the social system and individual levels of behaviors (the macro-micro problem) (Coleman, 1990). Notably, many sociologists no longer use the term “rational choice,” but have moved on to debates that have the same arguments with different labels, such as “social mechanisms” or “analytical sociology” and the role of intentions, beliefs, desires, and opportunities in determining behavior (see Hedström, 2005; Gross, 2009; Frye, 2012; Kroneberg & Kalter, 2012; Little, 2012; Manzo, 2012; Opp, 2013). Thus, sociologists who used to call themselves rational choice theorists now call themselves “analytical sociologists” to avoid the baggage that came with RCT. Because many educational researchers continue to use the rational choice term, however (see Chapters 1, 16, 19, 25, and 26 of this volume), I continue to use it in this chapter.¹

When RCT is applied to school choice, three factors of the parental decision-making process emerge: information, available choices, and a cost-benefit analysis of the best option (Bast & Walberg, 2004). Researchers applying rational choice to schools assume that schooling markets are open, fair, and unbiased (Bell, 2009). They hypothesize that the selection process results in both *allocative efficiency*, or a better match between goods and services and consumer preferences, and *productive efficiency*, whereby schools are pressured to provide better services in a more efficient manner (see Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013). Coleman (1992) went further, stating that parental choice options frame schools within a quasi-market mechanism. Schools are then compelled to react by attracting new parents and/or to improve to prevent parents from being lured toward better schools.

School Choice Research and the Rational Choice Perspective

The application of RCT to school choice is controversial (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013). Researchers have raised questions about the market concept as it relates to RCT, the ambiguity of schools RCT describes as “best,” the uniqueness of parent choice sets, and the role of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background in RCT.

Market Metaphor Implicit in RCT

RCT in school choice functions at the intersection of parental decision-making and market pressures. It predicts that parents utilize information and preferences to weigh the costs and benefits of choices in order to select the best school (Bast & Walberg, 2004). Within this dynamic, the hypothesis is that market pressures will drive lower-performing schools to improve (Hoxby, 2003). Researchers note, however, that when given choices, parents will not necessarily choose the best schools, and they will not necessarily “vote with their feet” and exit failing schools (for a review, see Austin & Berends, 2018). Instead, parents with resources, for example, may select schools on the basis of socioeconomic status, choosing those comprising high-status students and avoiding those with poor and minority students (Holme, 2002; see also Lareau & Goyette, 2014).

Similarly, empirical studies reveal that the school choice market, when framed within the constructs of RCT, has been overly simplified. Parents are portrayed as rational consumers who are fully informed, despite the fact that competitive private markets indicate that only a subset of consumers do research to make informed purchases (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016). Also, parents as consumers of education for their children are defined differently from consumers of other goods (see Chapter 16 of this volume). Lubienski and Lubienski (2013) have explained that within the context of school choice, the identity of the consumer is less than explicit due to the process by which education is produced and consumed. Although the most direct consumer of education is the student, most often the student is not making the choice among the options available in the education market at lower grade levels, even though this may change at the high school level (Barrow & Sartain, 2017; Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018).

RCT's Definition of “Best” Decision

Rational choice theory supports the idea that parents, if empowered, will opt for a school that can provide the best education for their child. For example, they may choose a school that is higher performing than the school in which their child is currently enrolled. The focus, then, is aimed at uncovering the process parents use when choosing schools. Several researchers have set out to investigate that process, revealing that it is complex, dynamic, and multistep (Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2011; Altenhofen et al., 2016; see also Chapter 25 in this volume). Typically, parents’ main concern when choosing a school is academic quality (Schneider et al., 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Altenhofen et al., 2016), but social networks, safety and discipline, distance between home and school, and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the school are also important factors (for review, see Altenhofen et al., 2016; Austin & Berends, 2018; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018).

Thus, researchers note the ambiguity associated with defining parents as rational choosers who rank schools clearly in terms of their academic desirability. In fact, some research suggests that academic quality means different things to different families, ranging from “decent” to “excellent” (Altenhofen et al., 2016), and such assessments of school quality may differ by socioeconomic status (Harris & Larson, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Much of the research points to the fact that RCT *does* provide the paradigm for parental motivation in so much as parents *believe* they are selecting the “best” schools. However, this theory falls short of predicting the choice process, because parent behavior demonstrates that they choose schools to which they have been most exposed or those that are most comfortable for racial/ethnic or socioeconomic reasons.

The Uniqueness of Parent Choice Sets

Despite the arguments that parents act as rational choosers, the school choice mechanism is complex, such that the set of schools from which parents make their choice is in fact distinct from one parent

to another (see Chapters 25 and 26 this volume). As mentioned, socioeconomic status and networks are factors in the decision-making process. The social networks of low-income families may be limited in the information they provide and may also portray schools within a given choice set as more similar than different (Holme, 2002; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). By contrast, high-income families have more social resources and connections to trust when making school choices—at times making the choice seem almost effortless (Roda & Wells, 2013; Lareau, 2014). In short, parents within networks trust the information provided to them, assuming there is a direct correlation between the quality of the school and the socioeconomic status of the families it serves.

Race-Ethnicity and RCT

Some research suggests that the racial/ethnic make-up of schools appears to be important to parents; in surveys and interviews, White parents have admitted to making school choices based on racial/ethnic preferences (Johnson & Shapiro, 2003; Goyette, Farrie, & Freely, 2012). Investigating the perceptions of school quality, Goyette (2008) found that parents ranked school quality in terms of the ratio of White to Black students. In this case, an increase of African Americans in a school directly lowered the school's rank irrespective of its actual academic attributes.

Surveys and interviews, however, are subject to social desirability bias, and differences in the ways that survey and interview questions are asked matters—resulting in confusion among respondents and/or different results across surveys (Stein et al., 2011). For instance, some surveys may ask parents to list their preferences, while others may ask them to choose preferences from a list, rank a given set of preferences from most to least important, or provide an extended response to their ranking by stating how they are interpreting the question and ranking (Altenhofen et al., 2016).

Recently, some researchers have attempted to distinguish between stated preferences (indicated on surveys and interviews) and actual preferences (indicated by the school actually chosen) (Phillips, Larsen, & Hausman, 2015). For example, Billingham and Hunt (2016) asked White parents to respond to experimental vignettes that prompted them to choose a school based on characteristics such as academic performance, safety, facilities, and racial/ethnic composition, and they found that White families strongly preferred predominantly White schools.

Modifying the Application of RCT to School Choice

The research reviewed above calls into question a clear-cut application of RCT to school choice, especially in terms of its assumptions about information, choice options, and cost-benefit analysis. Some have argued that the rigidity of RCT assumptions makes it more of a worldview than a set of testable hypotheses. For example, rather than a theory, RCT should be referred to as a method by which heuristics, or short-cuts, are patterned in ways that may not be optimal but are sufficient (Simon, 1947, 1957, 1990; Cookson, 2002). Others have argued for a more flexible application of RCT and propose describing parents as adaptive decision-makers who use a combination of cost-benefit, attendance patterns, and heuristics, which is more in line with extant research (Buckley & Schneider, 2003; Kroneberg & Kalter, 2012). Because of the complex ways in which parents make decisions about their children's schools, it is helpful to examine other theoretical perspectives that have been applied to school choice.

Institutional Perspective

A contrasting social theory to RCT on the consequences of school choice rests with the institutional perspective. Stemming from broader organizational analysis, this “new institutionalism” was developed by John Meyer and colleagues over several decades (Meyer, 1977; Meyer & Rowan,

1977, 1978; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1994; Scott & Davis, 2007; Scott, 2014). It characterizes schools as institutions with persistent patterns of social action that individuals take for granted. That is, rather than making a rational choice based on full information and ranked preferences, individuals make choices because they can conceive of no alternative; “routines are followed because they are taken for granted as the ‘way we do these things’” (Scott, 2014, p. 57).

Agreeing with rational choice theorists about the bureaucratic form of schooling that dominates the public school sector in the United States (and many other countries), institutional theorists take a different tack in their analysis of the education environment. For instance, they argue that the increase in bureaucratization of schools has led to an increase in coordination among the nested layers of the education system—from the federal government to the state, districts, schools, and classrooms. This has resulted in a set of taken-for-granted categories or rules, called *ritual classifications*, that define the actions of schools, teachers, and students (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978). Over time these ritual classifications become institutionalized and accepted as the norm for what constitutes legitimate school and schooling activities (Bidwell & Dreeben, 2006).

Examples include certified teachers, instructional time, standardized curriculum subjects, age-based classes of reasonable size, and use of curricular materials. In large part, these rules have shaped schools, whatever the type in whatever sector, making them look much more alike than different. Institutional theorists refer to this as *isomorphism* and have documented its diffusion both in the U.S. and throughout the world (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000; Baker, 2014).

To legitimize themselves within the broader community, schools’ compliance with ritual classifications is important—more important, according to institutional theorists, than maximizing efficiency of school operations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott & Meyer, 1994). In other words, schools adapt to their environments by adopting accepted rules and structures, leaving actual classroom instruction and learning relatively unexamined and unmonitored. Such loose coupling helps schools maintain their validity and legitimacy (Weick, 1976) and is further promoted by schools’ logic of confidence that delegates instruction to teacher professionals who ultimately control what goes on inside their classrooms.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that there are different types of environmental pressures on organizations to make them more similar than different. These pressures include *coercive isomorphism*, which stems from formal and informal pressures by organizations and groups on which the school depends (e.g., federal and state mandates); *mimetic isomorphism*, which stems from the adoption of similar structures and practices when facing uncertain tasks; and *normative isomorphism*, which stems primarily from professionalization of educators and professional networks.

School Choice Research and the Institutional Perspective

When applied to school choice—including public charter, magnet, and private schools, and home-schooling arrangements—institutional theory emphasizes that *all* schools operate within highly institutionalized environments, which shape what counts as legitimate schooling. All types of schools, no matter the sector or organizational form, adopt rituals, norms, and myths to support their legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978; Scott & Davis, 2007; Scott, 2014). Thus, even schools of choice pay attention to institutional rules such as teacher certification, curricular subject matter, instructional time, reasonable class size, and mostly age-based grade organization.

Although institutional theory provides a perspective that counters the rational choice theory, few empirical studies within the context of choice have relied directly on it. One such study is Huerta’s (2009), which used institutional theory as an analytic tool to understand the organization of a charter middle school in California. The aim of his study was to examine whether a school in a decentralized context exercises greater innovation in terms of the way it organizes and adopts new teaching and learning strategies—resisting the institutional pressures to look like other schools.

Specifically, Huerta examined various aspects of a predominately Latinx, working-class school over several years, covering its early formation to its bid for renewing its charter. Initially, teachers and administrators held a shared governance arrangement in which decisions were made collectively and administrative duties were shared. The school's aim was to make changes in teaching and learning at the expense of conforming to larger institutional rules and expectations. However, gradually the school began adopting a more traditional governance structure. Thus, rather than shared decision-making and administrative duties, teachers focused their energies on the classroom, while the principal assumed oversight of administration, and all of them increasingly clarified and codified job titles, roles, and tasks. And as the school prepared to renew its charter, which the authorizer stated would depend on institutional definitions of schools (e.g., staffing ratios, standardized academic programs), the transformation into a more traditional-looking school occurred.

Applying and building on institutional theory, Huerta emphasized the micro-level processes that contribute to the institutionalization of schools (see also Coburn, 2004). He concluded that charter schools may be forced to balance internal goals for instructional processes and innovation with external controls that pull schools toward conformity with demands of the broader community. His findings are helpful in exposing some of the underlying processes in schools that are consistent with institutional theory.

Other studies have found that schools of choice may differ in the ways they are organized compared with traditional public schools. For instance, in a review of the possible mechanisms that explain the positive effects of charter schools on student achievement, Gleason (2019) pointed to longer school days (or years), comprehensive behavioral policies with rewards and sanctions, a school mission that prioritizes improving student achievement, giving teachers feedback, the use of data to help teachers improve their instructional practice, and providing tutoring to students. In an exploratory national study, Berends, Peñaloza, Cannata, and Goldring (2019) found that compared with matched traditional public schools, charter schools were more likely to have a values-based curriculum, student work focused on long-term investigations and real-life projects providing authentic learning experiences, cooperative learning strategies, and student collaboration with outside experts.

Yet, not all research reveals that schools of choice are implementing innovative organizational and instructional practices. Preston, Goldring, Berends, and Cannata (2012) examined the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey to determine whether charter schools are more innovative when compared with traditional public schools in the nearby school district. On the whole, they found that charter schools were not more innovative, a finding similar to other reviews of the research on school choice (Lubienski, 2003; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). In a national study of charter and matched traditional public schools, Berends and Donaldson (2016) found that charter schools had less selective placements of students in high ability groups and a more even distribution of students across ability groups compared with traditional public schools. However, because the effects of ability grouping on student achievement in both charter and traditional public schools contribute to inequalities found in the broader literature (Gamoran, 2010), they concluded that this provides evidence more consistent with institutional vis-à-vis RCT theory.

Although the extant research cited above focuses mainly on charter schools, school choice has many forms, each of which—proponents argue—provides a way to challenge the bureaucratic nature of public schooling within the U.S. by introducing significant innovation. When choice is introduced, freedom from regulations closely follows (see Chapter 4 of this volume). Thus, one would expect that autonomy would lead to changing the technical aspects of schools rather than the norms and rules of the environment. Schools should exhibit less isomorphism, have less bureaucratic formal organizational structures, and be more tightly coupled around the technical aspects of the organization (see Davies & Quirke, 2006). Research to date remains rather thin and inconclusive, so a fruitful line of future inquiry is to examine these hypotheses in a variety of samples that include different types of school choice options.

Social Capital Perspective

Several researchers have argued that social capital is important for school reform efforts, social and academic learning environments, and student learning (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). As Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988, 1990) articulated, *social capital* refers to the social relations between persons—including obligations and trust, information, and norms and sanctions—that provide resources for achieving certain goals (such as improvements in student learning). Those familiar with the work of Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1990) and the rational choice perspective of Coleman (1990) may question the conciliatory discussion of these two sociologists. However, my aim here is to focus on the concept of social capital to further our understanding of schooling processes rather than test the differences between Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s larger theoretical perspectives.

Networks of administrators, teachers, parents, and children generate social capital at the school level as a means to create an educational setting conducive to the exchange of social norms and information (Hallinan, 2010). It can be understood as a group resource that promotes the success of students through the function of trust mechanisms (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), such that all network members believe in the expectation that others will act reliably and confidently (Coleman, 1990). Schools that foster relationships bound by high degrees of social capital facilitate students’ academic success (Hallinan, 2010; Freeman & Condron, 2011), and improving the social capital of disadvantaged students may significantly reduce inequalities between those from different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups (Hasan & Bagde, 2013).

School Choice Research and the Social Capital Perspective

The application of social capital theory to school choice stems mainly from the line of research that has compared public to private schools, particularly Catholic schools. Over the past several decades, a number of studies have examined whether students who attend Catholic schools learn more than similar students who attend traditional public schools (for review, see Austin & Berends, 2018; Berends & Waddington, 2018). When positive Catholic school effects have been observed, researchers point to social capital as a key mechanism explaining them. For example, in their study of High School and Beyond data from the 1980s, Coleman and Hoffer (1987) explained the positive relationship between Catholic school attendance and student achievement with the notion of *functional communities*—networks embedded in the larger community (e.g., school, church, synagogue, mosque) that foster social ties and face-to-face interactions. Such communities have *intergenerational closure*; that is, parents know their children’s friends, their children’s friends’ parents, and other adults in the school and community involved in their children’s education (see Coleman, 1990). Morgan and Sorenson (1999) noted that, as with every school, the core of a norm-enforcing school is the network of relationships among students, teachers, and parents. Schools function best when students build strong bonds with their classmates, when teachers cultivate nurturing relationships with their students, and when parents establish close ties with teachers (see also Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

With its emphasis on the benefits derived from participation in social networks and relations of reciprocity, social capital has encouraged researchers to examine relations between parents and their children, parents and teachers, students and teachers, and among the students themselves (see Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Some research on school choice other than private schools has relied on social capital theory, but those studies are few. For example, Schneider et al. (2000) considered the degree to which providing parents with choice increased their level of social capital based on over 1,600 interviews of parents in urban and suburban school districts. Using several measures of social capital (PTA involvement, volunteering at school, number of other parents with whom respondents talked about school matters, and the level of trust parents have in their child’s teacher), Schneider et al.

found that choosers in both urban and suburban settings were more likely to engage in activities that increased their social capital. Their analyses reveal that choice can increase parental involvement in voluntary organizations and school events, that choice can increase the trust between parents and teachers, and that choice can increase the level of interaction between parents. The scholars argued that all these behaviors generate social capital and that choice, by increasing local social capital, helps to build stronger schools and communities.

Hallinan (2010) analyzed the relationships between social capital and student outcomes in Chicago Catholic schools. Relying on Coleman's measure of social capital that asks whether parents know their children's friends and friends know their other friends' parents (i.e., intergenerational closure), she found that social capital had no relationship to mathematics and reading achievement but positive relationships to other student outcomes, such as school engagement, volunteering, discipline, feeling safe in school, and helping others in the community. Unfortunately, she had no comparison group of traditional public schools or other schools of choice (e.g., magnet or charter), and selection bias was not addressed.

More recently, Price (2015) analyzed social capital with network data from a set of Indianapolis charter schools to examine the relationships between principals and teachers and how these are associated with teachers' perceptions of students' academic engagement. She found that the stronger ties of principals to teachers were related to engagement, and these relationships were explained by the degree of principal trust in and social support of teachers. Although a unique study of network theory applied to charter schools, Price's exploratory findings suffer from generalizability, no comparison group of traditional public schools, and failure to address whether social ties, trust, and support among school staff improve actual student engagement and other student outcomes. Yet, the study provides some guidance for a promising line of research.

The application of social capital theory in research that examines forms of choice other than Catholic or private schools—charters, magnets, homeschools, vouchers, tuition tax credits—is sparse. More research is needed that focuses specifically on how measures of social capital (e.g., information flows, networks, obligations, trust, norms, and sanctions) mediate the effects of school choice on student outcomes. Rigorous analyses of the mediating role of social capital is necessary so that the appealing intuitive notion of social capital can become a more robust sociological concept with continuing heuristic value, especially in the research on school choice (Hallinan, 2010).

Social Organization of Schooling Perspective

In addition to studies of social capital, sociologists have a long tradition of examining the organization of schools, emphasizing the structures and processes that occur among and within different types (see Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000; Schneider, 2003; Berends, 2015). Since the first Coleman report in 1966, researchers have considered the relationship between school factors and student achievement, looking especially at how schools' structures and processes correlate with the societal stratification of educational, occupational, and economic opportunities. Studies have shown that, although student achievement varies among schools, the differences among classrooms and teachers are critical for student achievement growth (see Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2016; Hanushek, 2016). A central focus in this line of research is what goes on inside the "black box" of schools and how school and schooling factors contribute to both social inequality and productivity (Berends, 2015).

Sociologists have argued for the importance of understanding the social relationships that occur within schools, particularly the interaction within classrooms, because these experiences provide students with the most immediate socialization (Bidwell, 1972; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1995). For instance, Waller (1932) argued that the give and take during classroom instruction constitutes the "nucleus" of the school (p. 33) and Bidwell (1972) emphasized studying the

immediate social relations of students in schools and classrooms to discover “fairly sizable effects on students” (p. 5). Many researchers have followed in this tradition (see Gamoran et al., 2000; Schneider, 2003; Berends, 2015; Waddington & Berends, 2018).

In addition to examining relationships within schools and classrooms, sociologists also emphasize understanding the collective nature of schools, particularly when considering different types of schools of choice. Bidwell and Dreeben (2006) pointed out the importance of examining the collective properties of schools to understand “why they take the organizational forms they do, operate the way they do, and produce what they do” (p. 10).

Understanding schools as organizations provides an avenue for addressing the more macro rational choice and institutional theories described above. That is, by illuminating the structures and processes of different types of schools of choice (e.g., private, magnet, charter), a school organizational perspective can shed light on the hypotheses derived from the rational choice theory (e.g., autonomy fosters innovation) and from the institutional theory (e.g., environmental pressures make schools more alike than different). Social capital theory might be viewed as a component of school organizational theory in that social capital comprises a specific set of social processes that may mediate school choice effects.

School Choice Research and the Social Organization of Schooling Perspective

Sociologists have relied on the social organization of schooling perspective when examining school choice. Some of the best of this work has been applied to Catholic schools; future research, then, should expand this perspective to other types of school choice.

In their classic study of Catholic schools, Bryk et al. (1993) took a school organizational perspective, believing “that a comparison of alternative organizational forms may help us better understand how various features of school operations contribute to school life” (p. 55). The authors used a multi-method approach, including historical research, multivariate analyses of a number of databases (primarily the 1980s’ High School and Beyond), and an in-depth examination of school structures and instructional processes of seven Catholic high schools. Their quantitative results were consistent with previous studies that found a Catholic school advantage in terms of student achievement (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). The analysis also provides some insight into how Catholic schools are organized to promote higher academic achievement. It concluded that the strength of the curriculum focuses on core academic subjects, and teachers have high expectations of students and encourage them to take challenging courses.

Bryk et al. emphasized that the faith-based orientation of Catholic schools provides coherence and integration of school structures and processes, integrates the school community, and offers students with emotional, social, and academic support. Although the researchers were not able to completely rule out selection effects in their analyses, the amount of different types of data they examined provide a compelling case that Catholic schools are organizationally different from traditional public schools, and these differences are important for understanding achievement effects.

Nonetheless, Hallinan and Ellison (2006) criticized the Bryk et al. (1993) study for not analyzing specifically the mechanisms that lead to the Catholic school advantage in academic achievement. They argued that although Bryk and colleagues suggested that a rigorous curriculum, discipline, and a communal atmosphere promote student learning, they did not directly examine how Catholic schools guide learning opportunities for students and engage them in the learning process. Therefore, Hallinan and Ellison contributed to an organizational analysis of schools by analyzing ability grouping in Catholic compared with traditional public schools. They found that higher percentages of public school students were assigned to honors or advanced courses as well as to remedial courses.

By contrast, students in the Catholic school were primarily assigned to the regular ability group, which the authors said is consistent with the Catholic school philosophy that all students can learn and should be offered a challenging curriculum.

Controlling for a variety of student background characteristics and prior achievement, Hallinan and Ellison found that Catholic students outperformed public school students in English and mathematics. Moreover, they found that Catholic students in honors or advanced groups outperformed their public school counterparts in high-ability groups. Although based on a small local sample of schools, Hallinan and Ellison's study highlights how the organizational practice of ability grouping may differ by school sector, something that needs further study not only in Catholic schools, but also in other schools of choice (for charter schools, see Berends & Donaldson, 2016).

Recently, researchers have started to examine what is going on inside schools of choice, taking an organizational perspective (see Berends et al., 2019). Even so, there is much more to learn about what makes schools of choice effective for improving student outcomes, especially with the heterogeneity of school choice effects emerging in recent studies (Lee et al., 2018; Waddington & Berends, 2018; Betts & Tang, 2019). To further understand schools of choice as organizations, future research should focus on school mission and goals, principal leadership, educators' expectations for students, instructional program rigor and coherence, professional development and learning communities, and parent involvement and support (Bryk et al., 2010; Berends, 2015).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed several social perspectives on choice: rational choice theory, institutional theory, social capital theory, and the social organization of schooling perspective. Although rational choice theory provides a rationale for many forms of school choice, its assumptions are open to question (see Chapters 1, 16, 19, 25, and 26 of this volume). As an alternative, institutional theory predicts that school choice will not result in widespread innovation and different school organizational forms, but the school choice research base informing this perspective remains sparse. Social capital theory provides a lens to understand how the face-to-face social relationships among individuals and groups can promote certain goals and outcomes, but most of the existing research has been limited to examining Catholic or charter schools and lacks rigorous research designs. Similarly, the social organization of schooling perspective has been limited to dated comparisons between Catholic and public schools, though the studies in the Catholic sector provide a model for examining other areas of school choice, particularly charter, magnet, and other private schools.

The rationale for school choice is that providing autonomy, innovation, and accountability will allow schools of choice to operate more effectively vis-à-vis regular public schools. However, existing research has not provided conclusive findings one way or the other. For years, the usefulness of educational research to policymakers and educators has been challenged by the fact that knowing the characteristics of effective schools does not necessarily translate into creating such schools at scale (see Berends, 2014). Moreover, from a policy perspective, school choice is not a discrete treatment that leads to consistent, robust effects (Hess & Loveless, 2005). It may be, for example, that schools of choice are highly effective with certain curricula alignment and data-focused instructional strategies, while choice schools without these specific conditions (or those that allow teachers to be completely autonomous in their individual classrooms) are not effective at all.

Overall, because the research on the effects of school choice on achievement are heterogeneous, we know that some schools are likely to be more effective than others. For learning why this is so, the social organization of schools (informed by the ideas of social capital theory) provides a promising perspective. Only by gathering measures of school effectiveness—with a particular focus on a variety of data on organization, structures, and processes—will we be able to understand the conditions under which different school types improve student learning and other outcomes.

Note

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