SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE LATINX COMMUNITY: INCREASED OPPORTUNITY/EXCLUSION IN MECKLENBURG COUNTY

by

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ABSTRACT

LAURA KATHERINE HANDLER. School choice and the Latinx community: Increased opportunity/exclusion in Mecklenburg County. (Under the direction of DR. ROSLYN MICKELSON)

Advocates of market-based reform strategies such as school choice claim they will offer families better options to obtain a high-quality education for their child, yet empirical studies offer inconclusive evidence of gains in student achievement and point to the growing trends of racial and economic segregation emanating from increased schooling options. Furthermore, research indicates numerous contextual factors affecting families' participation and benefit from the expanded marketplace, with marginalized populations facing considerably more barriers in their search for high-quality education. This is particularly true for Latinx families, whose unique cultural, linguistic, social, and economic backgrounds influence their schooling decisions in ways that vary from the normative expectations of choice policies. Although their enrollment in public schools across the United States is steadily increasing, their participation in choice schools is often limited and impedes equitable access to high-quality schools. Because few empirical studies focus on this sector of the population, there is a great need for more comprehensive understanding of the behaviors and decisions of Latinx families across various nationalities, generations, and social classes.

This study aims to begin to fill this void in the literature, using a descriptive case study design to examine the ways in which Latinxs are and are not participating in the school choice process in Mecklenburg County. Data was triangulated among interviews

of 17 immigrant Latinx families and four school personnel, public documents providing school data and county demographics, and participant observations of school choice related events. Findings revealed a trend in the timing of families' participation: a majority did not engage in the educational marketplace until the middle or high school levels. A second notable trend was in the sectors of their participation: a majority of families applied to public magnet schools; the home school option was not mentioned; private schools were out of reach for the one family who looked into them; and charter schools were unfamiliar options to all but one family. Though parents sought to utilize their individual and cultural assets to obtain improved educational opportunities beyond their traditional public school, they faced numerous constraints in their participation due to their social stratification as immigrants with limited financial resources. These findings suggest implications for policy and practice particularly in resolving theoretical contradictions emanating from economic applications to democratic education.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Advocates of market-based reform strategies such as school choice claim they will offer families better options to obtain a high-quality education for their child (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Hess & Manno, 2011; Hoxby, 2003; Jeynes, 2014; Moe & Chubb, 2009; Stevens, McShane, & Kelly, 2015). Beyond the previous seemingly traditional choice of public, private, or home school, expanded options in the public realm, including charter, magnet, and virtual schools, present families with an increasingly complex process of selecting a school for their child to attend. Current trends of shifting enrollments across these various sectors demand the attention of researchers and policymakers alike as they take shape in different contexts and appeal to different populations.

Presently, 43 states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school laws (Education Commission of the United States, 2016), and over half of the nation's largest school districts allow parents to choose among publicly funded schools (Whitehurst, 2016). Nationally, there are approximately 6,800 charter schools enrolling almost three million students across K-12 levels (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). These numbers may only account for about six percent of the overall student population, but that rate of growth has increased by 62 percent over the last five years (National Alliance for Public School Charters, 2015). In states like Arizona, nearly 19 percent of the student population attends a school of choice (NCES, 2015), and in some school

districts, such as the District of Columbia, close to half of public school students are enrolled in charters (NAPSC, 2015). Charter school enrollment now slightly surpasses that of magnet schools (NCES, 2015), a specialized form of public schools that has been a schooling option since the racial integration of schools in the 1970s. When combined with private schools, which accounts for nearly 10 percent of the K-12 student population, and the increasing number who are in home schools (3.4 percent) (NCES, 2015), the educational marketplace can be seen as increasingly expanding beyond traditional public school options.

While school choice policies are often written to the normative, White middle class audience (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014), less careful attention or concern appears to be given to the experiences of families with a different set of resources and different cultural backgrounds (Condliffe, Boy, & DeLuca, 2015; Pattillo, 2015). These diverse populations, however, are the source of youth increasingly enrolled in American public schools. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2014 the public school students of the United States became a majority students of color, with the overall number of Latinx,[1] Black, and Asian students in public K-12 classrooms surpassing the number of non-Hispanic whites. The surge in Latinx students primarily accounts for this change, as this group's enrollment in public schools continues to rise, while others such as Whites and Blacks are on the decline (Berends, 2015; NCES, 2015).

[1] The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino/a" are often used interchangeably in reference to people whose origins can be traced to Spanish-speaking parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. The author prefers the gender-neutral term "Latinx" but will use "Hispanic" when referencing studies or data that originally employed it and "Latina/o" as used by original LatCrit publications

Notably, these students of color are also the same populations who tend to score dramatically below grade level on national standardized tests (NCES, 2015).

School choice plans have largely gained traction in urban areas experiencing great shifts in demographics. With increasing racial and ethnic diversity, along with rising rates of poverty, policymakers and district leaders have been challenged to address the disparities in performance among race/ethnic groups family levels of income (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Mickelson, 2014; Reardon, 2013, 2016). While urban districts are home to growing numbers of students and families from multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds, school buildings instead reflect neighborhoods increasingly segregated by race and class (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Fry & Taylor, 2012; Orfield & Frankenburg, 2013; Wilson, 2012). Students of color more likely to attend schools with high concentrations of poverty (Mickelson, 2014; Whitehurst, Reeves, & Rodrigue, 2016) and thus disproportionately thwarted from the benefits associated with having wealthier, higher achieving peers (Coleman et al., 1966; Mickelson, 2014; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012).

Given these contexts of urban education, school choice proponents generate broad support for their intentions, touting the liberation of students from their low-performing neighborhood schools and the offer of equal access, high-quality options (Holt, 2000; Jeynes, 2014; Stulberg, 2008; Wamba & Asher, 2003). While these claims are appealing, school choice skeptics offer the rebuttal that these aims are unrealized in practice (Horsford, 2015; Pattillo, 2015). Closely detailing the context surrounding school choice decisions, numerous studies have recognized the ways in which this system privileges the advantaged and ignores the complications inherently present in the process of choosing,

applying, enrolling, and sending a child to the preferred school (Bell, 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Pattillo, 2015; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Stein & Nagro, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013). From unmet admission requirements and transportation needs to information deficits and exclusionary practices, decisions surrounding school choice are affected by systemic, contextual, and circumstantial factors that disproportionately impair marginalized populations from accessing the proposed improved alternatives (Condliffe et al., 2015). Furthermore, research has shown choice policies often fail to deliver promises of significant improvements in educational opportunity for underserved students through voucher programs (Dynarski, Rui, Webber, & Gutmann, 2017; Figlio & Karbownik, 2016; Mills, Egalite, & Wolf, 2016) or charters (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; CREDO, 2013; Hoxby, 2003; Sass, 2006; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013).

In examining these inequities in participating in school choice options, a majority of the studies focus on Black students. Yet the largest non-white demographic group and fastest growing segment of the country's population are Latinxs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), whose experiences and perspectives are largely missing from the literature. This lacuna in the literature is problematic because nearly one in four school-aged children is Latinx, with estimates predicting Latinx students comprising one-third of public school enrollment by 2023 (NCES, 2015). As Gándara (2017) importantly notes, despite political rhetoric about frequent border crossings between the United States and Mexico, the flow of immigrants between the two countries is at a low (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015), and more than 90 percent of Latinx children are born in the United States, making them

citizens of this country and "our responsibility" (p. 5) to educate. Also significant, yet less frequently acknowledged, is the diversity of the Latinx community. While about two-thirds are from Mexico, nativity includes a variety of other locations, from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic to Central American and South American countries (Flores, López, & Radford, 2017). In addition to the varying cultural and linguistic heritages of this group, their social class, educational background, and political contexts of their respective home countries are vastly different. This diversity within the Latinx community requires attention by researchers, policymakers, and educators, particularly in relation to engagement in school choice.

Despite a steady increase in representation in public schools across the nation, data show less consistent proportional rates of enrollment for Latinxs in public schools of choice, particularly those with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) (Gastic & Coronado, 2011; Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010; Malkus, 2016a). The few studies focused on this group's experiences with the school choice process suggest unique characteristics that vary from the normative assumptions on which many policies are based. For example, in examining the choices of Latinx immigrant families of New York City's high schools, Sattin-Bajaj (2015) detailed the cultural models, social practices, and resources used by eighth grade students in leading their families' decisions. In comparison with Black and White counterparts, Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010) found that Latinx families applying to magnet schools were solidly middle class, yet had fewer family and friends enrolled in the system, suggesting that some individuals are relying on their own resources in search of the best education for their children. These findings provide new ways of considering the complex intersectionality of class, culture, and social capital, and

reveal a need for a more nuanced understanding of Latinx families' decisions in order to more fully engage them in the school choice process.

Thus, in this study I present the perspectives of Latinx families as they navigate the school choice process in Mecklenburg County. Mecklenburg County is an ideal study site because of its hypergrowth in Latinx population over the last twenty years and its recently expanded school choice options. Through a descriptive case study, with a detailed examination of interview data, school choice documents, and field notes from attending numerous community events, I analyze and interpret data guided by the frameworks of market theory of choice, reproduction theory, and Latina/o critical race theory, which are described in detail in the following section. In this study, I aim to contribute a more complete understanding of parent behavior and decisions as choice policies are enacted in the local setting, providing the perspective of a group often marginalized from educational policies and practices.

Theoretical Traditions

In this study I will utilize three theoretical perspectives to frame this complex phenomenon of Latinx school choice in Mecklenburg County. First, because school choice policies are, in theory, informed by economic principles applied to education, a firm understanding of market theory is most pertinent to this study, as it helps explain theoretical underpinnings of school choice policies. In analyzing school choice from the perspective of the Latinx community, I will draw upon reproduction theory and Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) for insight into the cultural implications of the issue, paying particular attention to their themes of empowerment and transformation. The

contributions of these three diverse perspectives allow for a more complete analysis of this case. Each of these theories is explained in further detail in the following sections.

Market Theory of Choice

Citing the inefficiencies and lagging performance of the American public education system, several economists and political scientists turned to market theory as a basis for radical reform for schools across the nation (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Hoxby, 1998). Viewing education as a commodified good, they theorized that its placement in an open market would allow consumer demand and subsequent competition to optimize productivity of schools and raise student achievement. As early as 1955, Milton Friedman advocated for the privatization of education to ease the financial burden assumed by the government, calling instead for government subsidies that would "tend to equalize the social and private costs of having children and so promote a better distribution of families by size" (p. 2). Furthering the argument that the highly bureaucratic and political interference of a democratically governed institution was the "root of the problem," Chubb and Moe (1990) inspired a movement for a change in the organization of schools, one that would abandon the current "coercive" system of direct democratic control that was "undermining academic excellence" (p. 11). Shifting control from "teachers' unions, professional organizations, and other entrenched interests" (p. 31), they thought that a decentralized market system would allow the desires and decisions of those most immediately involved, students and parents, to determine the educational programs of schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

In theory, an educational market system of choice operates with a few basic tenets relating to economic principles of supply and demand. First, by allowing consumers

options, students and parents have the opportunity to customize their education, selecting the school most aligned to their respective needs and interests (Hess & Manno, 2011). This framework designates power to the individual parent as the "rational actor" (Chubb & Moe, 1990) to be most knowledgeable and most heavily invested in evaluating schools (Bast & Walberg, 2004) and empowers parent advocacy groups to lobby for their children's interest (Kelly & McGuinn, 2012; Stevens et al., 2015). Second, in order to attract clientele, schools are compelled to respond to consumer demands, knowing that the availability of options allows consumers to be mobile and switch to alternatives. Thus, a rigorous competition among suppliers spurs innovation and efficiency of schools, and those that are deemed undesirable are unable to sustain a consistent base of supporters and are forced to close. In this way, the market imposes a form of natural selection with a survival of the fittest and an elimination of the weakest. Current efforts to promote school choice and a free market of education continue to be centered on these precepts. This view departs from the bureaucratically entrenched "traditional whole-school approach" (Hess & Manno, 2011; Hess, Meeks, & Manno, 2011) to maximize efficiency and innovation through technology (Moe & Chubb, 2009) and school-level reform (Stevens et al., 2015).

Over the last three decades, researchers have sought the empirical data to evaluate the validity of these ideological assumptions. While market reform advocates point to the success of the private sector in supporting high academic achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Howell, Peterson, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2006; Jeynes, 2014; Stevens et al., 2015), robust data-based analyses suggest less demonstrative gains, providing evidence that differences between the two sectors are negligible (Berliner & Biddle, 1997), and at the

elementary level, public schools outperform the private sector (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014). Furthermore, recent research shows students using vouchers to attend private schools fared worse than those remaining in the public system (Dynarski et al., 2017; Figlio & Karbownik, 2016; Mills et al., 2016). Additional research comparing the academic achievement of students at traditional public schools and charters (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2008; CREDO, 2013; Hoxby, 2003; Sass, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2013) and, more broadly, the impact of competition on the educational market (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Jabbar, et al., 2017) yields inconclusive results. The empirical record, thus, provides inadequate support for the claims that charters offer innovation and improvement purported by market theory. Furthermore, findings of numerous studies challenge the assumption that parents engage in school choice as "rational actors" as they face a myriad of economic, linguistic, and structural barriers that limit their participation and selection of a school that is the "best fit" for their child (Bell, 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Horsford, 2015; Pattillo, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013).

Alternative explanations for the rise of the choice movement of the education market involve contextual considerations of the latter decades of the 20th century, a time of economic recession and scrutiny of the government. Following the deregulation of numerous industries, including transportation, telecommunications, prison and juvenile corrections, and national security, policymakers turned to break up the monopoly of government-run schools (Thompson Dorsey & Plucker, 2016). Culminating social dilemmas of increasing violence, drug use, and poverty had presented numerous pressures on educators who were challenged to remedy these ills while simultaneously

adapting to an expanding and more diverse student population (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). The publication of the Department of Education's (1983) *A Nation at Risk* further fed growing sentiment of the dismal state of education in the United States, priming the environment for a paradigm transformation in favor of privatization and school choice (Mehta, 2013). Linking education to the future of the country's economic prosperity, *A Nation at Risk* laid a path for reform and accountability, an opportune plane for market theory to dismiss the democratic ideals of public education in favor of individual "excellence" for all (Mehta, 2013). Finally, with the expansion of educational opportunity across race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status threatening the traditional advantage of the elite, school choice provided a mechanism to preserve their privilege of academic attainment (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). These conceptions of schooling as a sorting machine that reproduces social stratification are the focus of the next theory.

Reproduction Theory

Similarly aligned in the intersection of economics and education, reproduction theory is used in this study to aid the analysis of knowledge, agency, and stratification in schooling policies and practices. Rooted in Marxist conceptions of conflict theory and inequitable distribution of the limited and desirable resources in society, reproduction theory cites the influence of a capitalist economy in the perpetuation of social divisions of labor and critiques the systems and structures that work to maintain such imbalances of power (Anyon, 2011; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Challenging the prevailing perception of the meritocratic and egalitarian nature of education, reproduction theorists examine the way schools serve as one such mechanism of preserving the status quo and reinforcing the hierarchy of class structure (Collins, 2009). Bowles and Gintis (1976) introduced the

correspondence principle to recognize the manners in which the structure of social relations established in different schools condition students for their respective role in the workplace—those further removed from the learning process in highly authoritarian settings are prepared for work in which orders are dictated to them, whereas those allowed more creativity and autonomy in their educational experiences are provided the skills and attitudes for middle and upper class occupations. There is also continuing evidence of systems of class-based tracking that thwart opportunities for social mobility, as students in various classes experience great differences in knowledge presented and intellectual processes cultivated (Anyon, 1981; Collins, 2009). Lucas (2003) contributed the term effectively maintained inequality (EMI) to explain how socioeconomically advantaged actors actively seek advantages wherever possible, either qualitative or quantitative in nature. In the case of school continuation and track mobility, a student's social background continuously influences educational opportunities and outcomes.

Beyond the reproduction of divisions of labor, theorists cite the manners in which schools reproduce ideologies of dominant social groups, privileging the knowledge, behaviors, and values of the upper classes (Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Acknowledging class-based differences in numerous social aspects such as family structures, child-rearing behaviors, and linguistic practices, researchers note the advantages afforded to students whose cultures are most congruent with the dominant culture (Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 1989, 2003). In this sense, cultural reproduction theory draws attention to the normative assumptions undergirding school choice policies, particularly in the typified behaviors of parents as "rational actors" (Chubb & Moe, 1990) engaged in the selection of their child's school. In contrast

to the American rhetoric of personal agency, reproduction theory emphasizes the systemic forces determining an individual's outcomes. Current studies examining the decision-making processes of marginalized populations illuminate the conditions and often limitations that influence families' exercise of school choice, drawing attention to the ways that differences in social connections, information channels, language, residence and economic means alter educational opportunity (Bell, 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Pattillo, 2015; Stein & Nagro, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013). While the macrostructural concerns of schools continue to be critiqued by scholars of subsequent traditions, American critical theorists (Anyon, 2014; Apple, 1978, 2013; Giroux, 1983) challenged the submissive characterization of individuals and instead emphasized the human agency of students and teachers to enact social transformation (Collins, 2009). Therefore, I expand upon the tenets and contributions of this critical social theory in the following section.

Latina/o Critical Race Theory

Rather than consider nondominant communities' cultures as disadvantages or devoid of value, critical race theory (CRT) helps frames them with an asset approach and an empowerment agenda seeking to eradicate racial oppression. Emerging in the 1970s amidst tensions between traditional civil rights legislation and critical race legal theory, CRT developed as an interdisciplinary framework for critically analyzing the legal barriers to racial justice and examining implications in other sectors of society (Tate, 1997). Critical race theorists problematize how the rhetoric of neutrality, the norming of social values, and the assumption of the universality of the White experience disguises overt racism while simultaneously serves the self-interest of the elite (Alexander, 2010;

Bell, 1987, 2007; Delgado, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Tate, 1997). Furthermore, a primary goal of CRT is to expose the systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking about nondominant cultures and shift the lens towards an asset approach that recognizes the rich cultural heritage and unique experiences persons from nondominant sociocultural backgrounds possess (García & Guerra, 2004; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). CRT emphasizes the role of the counterstory for giving voice to the marginalized and for sharing counternarratives to dominant perceptions (Delgado, 1987, 1989; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal, & Solórzano, 2001).

Although originally focused on the racial oppressions of the Black/White colorline, CRT has been extended to branches of scholarship centered on other racial/ethnic groups—LatCrit, AsianCrit, TribalCrit, for example—all of which share a common focus on the tenets undergirding their theoretical positions. Beginning in the late 1990s, LatCrit theorists (Solórzano, 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano, & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2001) focused on applications to education, citing these shared elements in their work: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches. Furthermore, LatCrit addresses the subordination uniquely experienced by Latinxs in the historical, political, and social contexts moving into the 21st century.

Yosso's (2005) contribution of the conception of community cultural wealth proves insightful in offering an alternative interpretation to Bourdieu's ideas of the role

of cultural capital in children's schooling outcomes. Her model both expands understanding of the dynamic forces of culture and recognizes the hierarchical value dominant society ascribes to these elements. Through an analogy of income and wealth, Yosso (2005) outlines the array of cultural assets students of color, specifically Latinas/os, possess. These forms of capital are described in Table 1. Thus, instead of considering students of color "culturally poor" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76), her framework of community cultural wealth operates from an alternate view that centralizes the knowledge, values, and experiences of the Latina/o culture. In congruence with the critique of societal structures perpetuating inequities offered by reproduction theory, yet in rejection to its normative references to White middle-class culture, LatCrit adds valuable tools to the analysis of school choice.

Table 1: Cultural assets described in Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth

Asset	*Description*
Aspirational capital	the resiliency to strive for high ambitions despite facing numerous barriers
Linguistic capital	the intellectual and social skills of multiple communication experiences
Familial capital	the kinship ties and values emanating from the home and community
Social capital	the assets available through networks of people and accessible community resources
Navigational capital	the skills to maneuver through social institutions such as schools
Resistant capital	the knowledges and skills of oppositional dispositions and behaviors that challenge inequality

Problem Statement

This study addresses several areas insufficiently researched by prior scholars. First, current trends in educational reform suggest that market-based strategies such as

school choice will offer families better options to obtain a high-quality education for their child (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 2009; Hess & Manno, 2011; Hoxby, 2003; Stevens et al., 2015). Research is mixed, however, in detailing the effectiveness of such reform, as some studies point to the increased segregation in both traditional schools and schools of choice, stemming from disproportionate representation of certain populations in enrollment (Ladd, Clotfelter, & Holbein, 2015; Malkus, 2016a; Whitehurst, et al., 2016). Next, additional studies reveal how the complicated process of application and enrollment can serve as a deterrent for some families, often of lower socioeconomic status or nondominant cultural background (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1996; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Haynes et al., 2010; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). In particular, the perspectives of Latinx families in how they access and experience the process of school choice is largely missing from the literature. Given the increasing number of Latinx families in Mecklenburg County and Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, the diversity of their geographic, cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds, and their often lower academic achievement, there is a need for research to examine Latinx engagement in school choice practices in order to support equitable access to high-quality education.

Research Purpose

The rapid expansion of the Latinx population in the Charlotte Mecklenburg metropolitan area creates an impetus for improved and comprehensive understanding of the educational needs of Latinxs, and what role the educational marketplace can play in meeting the needs. Previous research has suggested particularities and differences in this group compared to other racial/ethnic groups, yet additional insights are needed to more

accurately portray the knowledge, behaviors, values, and opinions of Latinxs. This study intends to examine the ways in which Latinxs are and are not participating in the school choice process, and to detail the contexts and circumstances surrounding these findings. Given the great diversity within the Latinx community, a primary aim of this work is to provide a more nuanced examination of the influences of factors such as nativity, socioeconomic status, educational background, generation status, and family structure on families' decisions. Recognizing that school choice policies are likely to continue to proliferate in the United States, this research asserts that more intentional consideration of this rising new population of Latinx students is necessary to create equitable educational opportunities and outcomes in public education.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1) How do Latinx families in Mecklenburg County understand and navigate school choice options and select or not select a school for their child's education?
2) How do these decision-making processes vary within the Latinx community?
3) Does school choice advance greater access to high-quality education for Latinx families in Mecklenburg County? If so, how? If not, why?

Significance of Study

At a time when the role of school choice, particularly the future of charter schools, dominates educational reform initiatives from national to district levels, this study provides important, relevant insight to the issue from the fastest growing segment of the population. The significance of this study lies in its descriptive portrayal of a group whose unique needs, perspectives, and preferences are frequently disregarded in the

crafting of school choice policies. Previous research of Latinx participation in school choice (e.g., Haynes et al., 2010; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016) has been largely restricted to only a segment of the population—those families who are already choosers and have applied to magnet or charter schools. Other forms of participation documented in the literature pertain to involuntary choice programs, such as the open enrollment system of New York City's high schools, where older students have shown to take on a majority of that responsibility (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). This case study contributes a more comprehensive approach to analyzing Latinx patterns of choice in an urban district with voluntary choice options throughout K-12 levels.

Furthermore, in the context of an urban school district historically focused on the binary racial integration of Whites and Blacks, this study investigates the characteristics of its burgeoning Latinx population, calling attention to the similarities and differences between and among racial/ethnic groups. Such research informs policymakers and educators of the barriers and opportunities present in the current system of choice, and the implications from this study can be used to move the district towards more equitable policies and practices. While each district's historical and social contexts are unique, this case study offers analytical generalizations that can potentially aid other districts' development of choice programs.

Finally, as school choice becomes increasingly politicized and influenced by the decisions of policy actors, political scientists, and economists, this research is intended to strengthen the voice of parents, particularly those traditionally marginalized in society, as they search for quality education for their children. Addressing contradictions in perceptions of empowerment and agency among various theoretical frameworks related

to school choice, implications drawn from this study help bridge policy to practice with a specific focus on equitable educational opportunities for the future of our nation.

Definitions of Relevant Terms

Charter school: a publicly funded school independently run under the terms of its charter, or agreement between the school founders and the local education authority

Controlled choice: a choice plan that utilizes weighted or selective enrollment, allowing parents to enroll their child in any public school within the district, yet maintains demographic balance among schools with deliberate guidelines or restrictions on who can enroll

Home school: education of a child takes place at the home, typically by a parent or guardian

Magnet school: a public school situated within a district that offers a specialized theme or program to attract a diversity of students

Open enrollment: a plan that allows parents to enroll their child in any public school within the district

School choice: a broad array of school assignment strategies that includes traditional public schools, public magnet schools, public charter schools, home school, private schools, and virtual schools, and permits parents and children options to choose the student's school

Traditional public school (TPS): a publicly-funded and government-run school to which a student is zoned to attend according to a district's pupil assignment plan

Voucher: a government-paid subsidy to parents that can be applied to private school tuition; in North Carolina, the program is called Opportunity Scholarship

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This study seeks to provide a detailed examination of the school choice process as experienced by the Latinx population in Mecklenburg County with aims of improving understanding of the decisions of families in the fastest-growing population in American public schools. In order to portray a more complete picture of the results of enactment of local initiatives within the national context and to consider the intersectionality of factors such as race, class, and nationality, I use three frameworks to analyze the data: market theory of choice, reproduction theory, and LatCrit. Because school choice policies are being used and expanded as reform initiatives throughout the country, it is important both to understand what previous studies have already learned, as well as suggest how new findings contribute to the existing body of literature. This chapter offers an overview of the most prevalent research to date with a concerted focus on the Latinx perspective. Beginning with a historical perspective of school choice, I provide contextual background necessary for understanding its inception and evolution. In the second section, I focus on the relationship of choice with educational equity, highlighting research that has evaluated major tenets of market theory, academic achievement, and individual empowerment, giving concerted focus to the perspective and impact on marginalized populations. Finally, I conclude by placing school choice in the broader topic of parent

involvement, considering the cultural elements that distinguish Latinx families from other groups and frame their engagement in choice policies.

History of School Choice

In 1954, over half a century ago, *Brown v. Board of Education* deemed the educational opportunities available to children in the United States on the basis of their skin color "inherently unequal." However, for more than a decade following the landmark ruling, school populations went largely unaffected and remained intensely segregated as a majority of states resisted compliance. As the nation waited for more specific definitions of desegregation and requirements for integrating schools, policymakers simultaneously began to offer "freedom of choice" for parents to select schools for their children to attend. White students could "choose" to attend all-black schools, yet they did not; black students could "choose" to attend all-white schools, yet they faced numerous barriers and threats to prevent their actual entry (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996; Mickelson, Bottia, & Southworth, 2008). In this way, school choice served as a mechanism to preserve segregation, and it was not until the Supreme Court ruling of *Green v. New Kent County* in 1968 that systems of choice were struck down in support of full desegregation (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). In the 1970s, magnet schools, public schools with specialized programs and foci, were created as a means of voluntary integration by drawing White students to predominantly minority-populated schools, recognizably "a more palatable means of generating racial balance and often replaced unpopular race-based mandatory assignment and busing programs" (Davis, 2014, p. 401). The Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) was initiated in 1976 as an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), providing federal aid for the development and

operation of magnet schools in order to promote such voluntary school desegregation efforts and to further educational initiatives of racial equity (Smrekar & Honey, 2015).

A number of circumstances, notably the release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a report that exposed the lagging academic performance of American youth in the global context, pushed educational reform towards a concerted turn from concerns of desegregation and equity towards a broader focus on quality and ensuring "excellence for all" (Mehta, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; Thompson Dorsey & Plucker, 2016). Employing a market-based approach that theorized increased options would promote competition among schools and spur academic achievement, policies sought to offer alternatives to the perceived failing system of public education and to epitomize the individual's choice in pursuit of self-interest/quality education. The concept of vouchers, or subsidies of public funding that could be applied to private school tuition, was touted as purchasing power for poor families and equitable means of liberating them from their poor-performing traditional public school (Friedman, 1962). While these programs experienced limited success in conjunction with community building initiatives (Carnoy, Adamson, Chudgar, Luschei, & Witte, 2007), another alternative was proposed to create schools not institutionally bound by the highly bureaucratic and seemingly ineffective democratically-controlled system but to its own established charter as well as the demands of the market (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Free of some of the regulations of traditional schools, these publicly funded and attended charter schools could be innovative in design and practice, a hopeful solution to the dismal proficiency rates of students across the country. Mandates in *No Child Left Behind* (2002) permitted parents to opt out of sending their children to public

schools deemed "failing" by the law's accountability standards and enroll them in schools outside their designated attendance areas. More recently, federal initiatives such as *Race to the Top* prompted a flurry of charter school development, intending to spur innovation in education reform to turn around low-achieving schools by lifting certain restrictions and shifting control from traditional government-run schools.

As briefly described, school choice has taken many forms over the last half century. Original legislation proposed choice for parents in order to resist racial integration following the *Brown v. Board* decision, distinguishing differences among schools mainly by population demographic. Since then, traditional public schools (TPSs), characterized by their funding by taxpayer dollars, their governance and staffing by state-run employees, and their enrollment by a defined residential zone, have morphed into various academic structures, and parents have been offered an increasingly influential role in selecting the site of their child's education.

Magnet schools, which are public schools with a specialized curricular theme or pedagogical approach, have open boundaries within or across district lines in order to attract various stakeholders from across the area, often with the intention of diversifying the student population. Some schools are considered partial magnets because they combine elements of traditional public schools and magnet schools: a portion of their enrollment is reserved for those living in the specified neighborhood attendance zone, and a portion participate in a within-school magnet program or a school wide magnet program is in place (including students who opt in and those who do not). Magnet schools require a separate application for admission, and if demand is higher than available spots, a lottery system is typically used to select students for enrollment.

This premise of specialized selection and intradistrict choice has been expanded by some districts to policies of open enrollment, allowing students to apply to any of its public schools in order to better match students' needs to particular programs offered by schools. For example, New York City uses such an intradistrict compulsory choice plan for its high schools, with student applications including a ranking of their preference of school to attend. Students' requests are matched with those of the schools, and a lottery system is used to determine student assignment. Often transportation is not guaranteed through this system beyond a certain distance around the school. Interdistrict open enrollment plans allow students to cross district lines and attend school in a neighboring district, intending to offer families choice and increase competition among schools. In contrast, interdistrict desegregation plans are designed to encourage voluntary integration of suburban and urban schools, permitting students to attend schools with potentially different demographic and programmatic settings. Because of the complexities and expenses associated with this type of plan, it is only available in about 20 percent of states (Whitehurst, 2016). Finally, controlled choice plans operate similarly to intradistrict open enrollment with district public schools available to all students for enrollment, yet deliberate guidelines or restrictions are established to ensure demographic balance among schools.

There are several other alternatives to the traditional public schools and assignment plans, with charter schools garnering the most attention as of late as they increasingly enroll a greater percentage of the national student population (NCES, 2016). Charter schools are another form of public education, open to all with tuition funded by the state, sometimes supplemented by private philanthropic dollars. With less control of

government officials, however, these schools are guided by their founding charter, or contract with the state, and run by private entities. While free of certain regulations, charter schools are held accountable for students' academic achievement. In order to enroll, students have to submit an application and if there is a waitlist, obtain a spot through a lottery system.

In contrast to shifting enrollment patterns in public education, the private school sector has experienced a slow yet steady decline in attendance, now with just under 10 percent of students choosing this option (NCES, 2015). With funding provided by the individual rather than the government, private schools have relative autonomy in their operation. The current federal administration has revitalized a movement for voucher programs, or private school choice, which award public funds to the student and allow their allocation to private school tuition. In North Carolina, the Opportunity Scholarship program was initiated in the 2014-1015 school year and provides up to $4,200 per year for eligible children in grades K-12 who choose to attend a participating nonpublic school. One final and increasingly popular private option for parents is home school, in which the parents or guardians provide education in their residence. While a very small percentage of families, especially Latinxs, choose this alternative, its numbers are on the rise both nationally (NCES, 2015) and in Mecklenburg County (NCDOA, 2017).

School Choice and Educational Equity

More than half of the nation's largest school districts offer parents the choice of selecting among publicly funded schools, reflecting a trend in national educational policies designed to employ school choice as a reform strategy to improve schools and raise academic achievement (Whitehurst, 2016). As the movement for choice has become

increasingly political, so has the divide between those who support and oppose such initiatives. Researchers have conducted a plethora of studies to measure and compare choice schools and traditional public schools from a number of angles in order to evaluate their impact. This section aims to synthesize this large body of literature related to school choice while maintaining a focus on equity and, in particular, representation of the Latinx community.

Improving Academic Achievement

The driving force behind school choice is its perceived ability to afford improved educational attainment for American youth. Thus, a number of studies have focused on the academic outcomes resulting from choice policies, yet the complexities in reporting such results are abundant. Given the magnitude of the scope of school choice programs and literature, the following sections examine charters and magnets, the most readily available alternatives to traditional public schools in Mecklenburg County.

Charter schools. Due to the great variance in policies, schools, and programs across the nation, along with constant changes in legislation and enrollment, research broadly investigating student achievement as it relates to school choice has yielded inconsistent results and proves quite challenging for reporting clear conclusions (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen 2008; CREDO, 2013; Hoxby, 2003; Sass, 2006; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). One common approach researchers have taken to this analysis is to compare the academic performances of similar students in schools of choice and traditional public schools, as done by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2013). Their report, which evaluated charter schools in 27 states across the nation and accounted for 95% of charter school

population, found overall modest gains in reading and no gains in math for students of charters, yet for certain subgroups, the differences were more significant. While Whites and Asians showed lower growth in comparison to their peers at traditional public schools, Blacks and Hispanics, particularly those labeled English Language Learners, experienced significant academic benefits attending charter schools, as did students of poverty. Again emphasizing the great variance in charter school performance, the report found that 25 percent offered a superior education in reading, yet 19 percent of charter schools provided lower quality education; in math, the results were worse, with only 29 percent providing higher results, and 31 percent providing significantly worse education than their traditional public school counterparts. The authors caution of the harm of low-performance standards and accountability, recognizing the irreversible damage of these lower-quality schools on the students attending them and on the traditional public schools that potentially absorb them after their closure.

Analyses of academic achievement reveal differences not only by population subgroups, but also considerably by the state in which they operate, as charters are greatly affected by the policies governing their requirements for approval, the populations they serve, and the standards by which they might have to close. The 2013 CREDO report credited over half of the participating states' charters providing better learning gains in reading, but recognized that over a quarter were providing weaker learning outcomes. States' charters fared worse in math, as slightly more than half failed to offer an improved alternative. Notably, there was great variance across the average beginning scores of charter school attendees, with students in some states such as Missouri beginning well below average, and some, such as those in North Carolina, entering well

above average. The authors are deliberate in recognizing these contextual differences, as they significantly affect interpretation of data and often get lost in generalizations drawn from national averages and trends. Thus, these differences call attention to the need for more accurate methods of comparisons, as well as prompt a closer look at the particular populations that different states are enrolling in their charter schools, in order to get a more holistic understanding of the role of charters in educational reform.

These differences in populations of charter schools across the country were the focus of a series of recent reports. Intending to avoid oversimplified characterizations of schools, Malkus (2016a, 2016b) geographically matched each charter school across the nation to five neighboring traditional public schools (TPSs), and then compared demographic data of charters, their neighboring TPSs, and TPSs. In the first report, Malkus (2016a) detailed national trends based on this nuanced approach, finding that these schools often differ significantly, but not always in consistent patterns. When compared to neighboring TPSs rather than all TPSs, charters serve similar levels of poor students and students of color, mainly because they are predominantly located in urban areas where there are already higher concentrations of poverty and diversity. Notably, special education students are underrepresented in charter schools in comparison to either neighboring TPSs or TPSs, as are Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students, confirming the claim that "charters serve disproportionately fewer students who are more expensive to educate" (p. 11). Diving further into the data, Malkus (2016a) investigated by how much charters and their neighboring TPS differ by examining their distribution of differences rather than general averages. These findings reveal important data about the targeted populations of charters, and their extensive variance in populations served:

charters enroll disproportionately more Blacks, disproportionately fewer Hispanics, and both higher and lower proportions of Whites than neighboring TPSs. Similarly, students of poverty are both disproportionately overrepresented and underrepresented in charter schools, suggesting trends of racial and economic isolation in these schools of choice.

Because of the great variance in charters across the nation, in his second report, Malkus (2016b) sought to analyze population patterns by state, where respective laws and advisory boards govern charter schools' composition and function. Through this state-specific method he presents detailed demographic and achievement data of charter sectors and neighboring TPSs, calculating their distribution of differences from TPSs. In this manner he clarifies distinctive trends stemming from different charter policies. For example, the charter sector in Ohio differs greatly from neighboring TPSs, serving disproportionately more Black students and students of poverty than TPSs; these charters also tend to be lower in achievement than TPSs. In contrast, nearly a quarter of the charter sector in North Carolina serves disproportionately fewer Black students, and almost three quarters of charters serve disproportionately fewer Hispanic students and students of poverty; more than half of these charters have disproportionately higher levels of student achievement.

In an analysis of charter schools in North Carolina, Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein (2015) describe similar findings: authors note a growing trend of an overrepresentation of White students and students whose parents have a least a college degree. Consequently, they conclude that the rise in student achievement in this sector is largely attributable to the shift in enrollment patterns, rather than the quality of the programs being offered by

the schools. These results suggest the needed attention to particularities of contexts when drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of charter schools.

One other consideration in the variance of charter school performance is the particular academic model of the institution. Because charters are freed from many of the constraints facing traditional public schools, some implement a specialized focus in a curricular program or philosophy to attract certain families, similar to the allure of magnet schools. For example, while nationally differences in achievement seem insignificant, in teasing apart trends in performance, one particular model of charter schools, those with a "no excuses" design, have shown to greatly improve the achievement levels of the predominantly Black students of poverty who attend them (Whitehurst, 2016). Malkus and Hatfield (2017) found a similar correlation between these highly structured, discipline-focused schools and the demographic to whom they appeal, yet their report does not provide achievement data. Instead it acknowledges the difficulty in separating learning outcomes and levels of effectiveness from the many contextual factors of schools, such as its particular population, location, teacher quality, or parental engagement, which may influence proficiency rates. Again, clear and convincing conclusions of the effects of market-based reform are rare in the complicated contexts of education.

One final aspect to consider in this analysis of the impact of charter schools is the academic achievement of students at traditional public schools, as the competition, or even threat of competition, produced by the increasingly open educational marketplace is theorized to spur improvement of learning across all schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 1998, 2003). Meta-analyses attempting to synthesize this body of literature again

produce mixed results with no significant effects, positive or negative, on the achievement of students in districts or states with choice policies (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Jabbar et al., 2017). Authors again emphasize the great variance that exists in studies' methodological design as well as the policy design affecting their respective research. Finding no associations in reading or math scores with nearby charter competition, Davis (2013) analyzed the impact of charters on student achievement in a more indirect way, through changes in the organizational practices of TPSs. Using 10 measures of organization, including aspects such as instructional preparation and teacher absenteeism, Davis found no statistical differences between TPSs located within close proximity (2.5 miles) of charters and those of subsequent distances away. Her work contributes to previous studies recognizing possible limitations of TPSs' capacity to respond to charter school competition, particularly those located in urban areas that tend to be underresourced or under strict administrative control (Betts, 2009; Rofes, 1998; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000).

Furthermore, according to a review of charter school research by Wohlstetter, Smith, and Farrell (2015), a barrier to more comprehensive improvement among community schools is the "discord between district and charter sectors, and an inability to collaborate for system-wide improvement" (p. 118). In one partnership project researched by Fryer (2014), the effective practices of New York City charter schools were shared and implemented into schools in Houston, Denver, and Chicago, resulting in significant gains in students' math achievement. In another partnership project funded with $25 million by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, independent evaluators from the Center on Reinventing Education report at interim progress that is "episodic" and "sometimes

stalled" (Yatsko, Nelson, & Lake, 2013, p. 3) as partnerships experienced setbacks and entrenched tensions mitigating collaboration. While more empirical research needs to be done on the collaborations among educational sectors, the search for conclusive evidence supporting this main tenet of market theory in spurring competition and affecting academic gains remains elusive.

These studies have illuminated the numerous complexities surrounding market theory's simplistic notion that an expanded marketplace will raise achievement across all educational sectors. Notably, these studies suggest an inextricable link between academic achievement and student demographics, most notably class and race. Thus, when debates on the educational equity afforded by charters focuses on the participants, the evaluation of charter schools extends beyond academic achievement. Because a preponderance of literature has recognized the detrimental effects of school segregation (Linn & Welner, 2007; Mickelson, 2014; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012), the unintended consequences of choice policies also come into consideration.

Numerous studies have recognized the racial and economic imbalance present in most charter schools, as well as the exacerbated rates of segregation of the schools they are leaving (Frankenberg, McDermott, DeBray, & Blankenship, 2015; Hawn Nelson, 2017; Ladd et al., 2015; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Whitehurst, 2016). If student achievement is the primary focus of charter schools, then Whitehurst (2016) argues such isolation is irrelevant, as some high-minority, high-poverty charter schools have effectively improved educational outcomes, proving school quality a "primary mediator of student achievement rather than the racial or economic makeup of a school's student body" (p. 6).

Just as Whitehurst (2016) encourages policymakers to be clear about their aims—either to improve the quality of schools or reduce school segregation or both—in their study, Ladd et al. (2015) include the four goals proposed by North Carolina legislators, one being to improve student learning and another to "increase learning opportunities *especially for students at risk of academic failure*" (p. 4). Additionally, they note that original legislation called for charter school populations to "reasonably reflect" those of their surrounding communities within a year after opening. Their research calls attention to several ways charters fail to achieve these aims: the increasing overrepresentation of White students, the disproportionate number of failing charters that predominantly serve students of color and students living in poverty, and the disparities in parent satisfaction as evident in students' continuous enrollment year to year. Just as Malkus (2016a) reports an underrepresentation of LEP and special needs students in charter schools nationally, Ladd et al. (2015) note a similar trend and express concern of the negative impact on traditional public schools having a higher number of students requiring the most financial expenditures with limited funding available from the state. Thus, this research points to the inability of market-based reforms to provide higher quality education equitably for the nation's students, particularly those in North Carolina, and compel legislators to align their policies and accountability practices with the one of the original purposes of creating charter schools, to serve the needs of those whom the traditional public schools have not met.

Magnet schools. Compared to the growing published research focused on charter schools, magnet schools receive less attention in the literature, despite their longevity and impact on students, districts, and communities. Consistent findings across several large-

scale, national studies suggest that interdistrict magnet schools are effective in providing higher student achievement in a more racially and economically diverse setting than other forms of schooling (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009; Gamoran, 1996). Providing the most convincing evidence, Bifulco, Cobb, and Bell (2009) used results from lottery admissions to study two magnet high schools in Connecticut to compare the achievement of students who gained entry into the magnet program and those who were denied. To avoid selection bias, the authors used longitudinal data to control for factors such as students' previous achievement levels and family characteristics, and then applied these estimators to the broader set of magnet schools serving central cities of Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury. Researchers found that attending the magnet schools had a positive effect on academic achievement, particularly reading. Although the particular beneficial aspects of magnet schools could not be identified in this study, recently a team of researchers conducted intensive case studies on four successful turnaround magnet schools. Ayscue and colleagues (2017) describe three common elements observed that contributed to positive outcomes: rigorous instruction that fosters positive interactions, structures that support students and relationships, and intensive and meaningful family and community engagement.

Other positive effects related to magnet schools extend beyond test scores. Proven successful at attracting and retaining students and families, magnets have higher rates of attendance than nonmagnet schools, and report fewer behavioral infractions (Engberg, Epple, Imbrogno, Sieg, & Zimmer, 2011). Furthermore, with their integrative mission, magnet schools have been found to offer social benefits to attending students, as they reported feeling more comfortable with peers of another race and were more likely to

have diverse friends (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009). Because previous studies have shown numerous advantages of learning in a diverse environment, including improved relationships and reduced biases (Allport, 1954; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008), interdistrict magnet programs serve a valuable role in creating these integrated spaces and offering students these enhanced learning opportunities, some of which affect students beyond graduation. Diverse schooling experiences yield significant improvements in long term outcomes such as educational and occupational attainment (Johnson, 2011), levels of civic engagement (Kurlaender & Yun, 2005), increased likelihood of living and working in integrated settings (Wells & Crain, 1994), and a foundation for just, multi-ethnic democratic societies such as the United States (Mickelson, 2014; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012).

Notably, though magnet schools' original purpose served to further integration efforts, the 2007 ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools* determined that race could not serve as the basis of pupil placement, shifting magnet school focus away from racial diversity (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011). Because the majority opinion advocated for a colorblind, race-neutral approach to student assignment plans (Diem, 2015), school districts across the nation have deviated from racial references in their definitions of diversity to encompass a combination of many different demographics, such as socioeconomic status, education level, ethnicity, and race (Frankenberg et al., 2015). This movement reflects contemporary changes in educational reform from equity-based policies towards market-based initiatives promoting individual choice and excellence for all, as previously described in this chapter.

In light of these changes, a recent study by Siegel-Hawley and colleagues (2017) found that a majority of magnet schools receiving funding from MSAP are not meeting their minority group isolation goals. As policies are increasingly providing preference for neighborhood residents, their populations are less comprised of the underserved students whom they were intended to support. While at their inception magnet schools were intended to aid integration efforts between Black and White students, aims of diversity have not fully adapted to incorporate the fastest growing racial/ethnic group, Latinxs, who are typically underrepresented in this category of choice schools (Haynes et al., 2010). Thus, researchers emphasize caution in interpreting the higher achievement gains of this choice model because the demographics of these schools are often skewed from the greater populations in their area.

Additional studies examine the role of magnet schools in the broader context of educational reform. While the original intention of magnet schools was to increase diversity, research shows that magnet schools can have the opposite effect, particularly when enrollment policies include admissions requirements that privilege those families more educated and with higher financial resources (Vopat, 2011). Magnet schools can be used as a way for families to leave neighborhood schools that have a high percentage of students of color or students of lower socioeconomic levels (Saporito, 2003). Furthermore, research examining parent behavior in the educational marketplace shows that families tend to select schools that are a reflection of their own racial group rather than seek diversity through the school choice (Henig, 1996). Finally, partial magnets can also result in within school segregation: though the schools might attract more diverse

populations, within the classrooms of the schools there remains a homogeneous grouping and separation of students along racial and socioeconomic lines (Davis, 2014).

Scholars provide recommendations for remedying these issues: extensive, multi-faceted outreach and marketing efforts to improve information channels for underserved families (Dougherty et al., 2013; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017); free transportation without attendance zones to ensure all students are able to attend a school with a desired magnet program, regardless of residence location or economic constraints (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2013); well-design weighted or specialized lotteries to provide preference for students of color or from low-income families without admissions requirements (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017); matching of geographic information systems data and student demographic information to inform siting decisions of magnet schools (Smrekar & Honey, 2015); and professional development to better prepare educators to teach diverse populations (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2013). While attention to the structural and programmatic details of school choice plans can have a significant impact on enrollments, ultimately the decision is made based on parents' perceptions or intentions. Thus, the next section will focus on research that analyzes the behavior of parents as they engage in the process of school selection.

Empowering Parents

The previous section focused on one of the tenets of market theory, that increased choice would drive innovation and improve academic outcomes for students, particularly charter schools with less bureaucratic interference (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1952; Hess & Manno, 2011; Hoxby, 2003; Jeynes, 2014). A second tenet is that choice shifts control from the school system to individuals. Advocates of school choice

emphasize the expertise and ability of parents, positioning them to select schools most aligned to their child's interests and needs (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Critics of school choice, however, challenge the assumption that all parents have an equal capacity to activate their option to choose (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Schneider et al., 2000). As detailed below, researchers cite numerous ways in which this system privileges the advantaged and ignores the complications inherently present in the process of choosing, applying, enrolling, and sending a child to the preferred school. The following sections provide a more nuanced examination of what putting choice into action entails.

Limited options. Despite the rhetoric of making more schools available to families, opponents call attention to the fact that all options are not available to all students (Bell, 2009; Condliffe et al., 2015; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Pattillo, 2015). Often magnet schools or selective schools within intradistrict choice plans have entrance requirements based on performance standards of test scores, auditions, or interviews. Basing admission on previous achievement prohibits a more representative participation as it immediately excludes certain students from consideration (Pattillo, 2015). Students with learning disabilities or those who have had to attend an under resourced school may be ineligible to meet admissions requirements due to conditions beyond their control (Condliffe et al., 2015). Furthermore, special needs students and populations qualifying as LEP must receive services that require funding that might not be available to smaller choice schools such as charters, similarly limiting their school options (Malkus, 2016a). In that sense, a student's first inequity may unjustly result in a second thwarted opportunity for success in school. Additionally, in some cases students must complete a lengthy application in order to even apply for a certain school, which may deter

activating options of choice, particularly for those with low levels of English literacy. Knowledge of such seemingly hidden or assumed requirements illuminates another significant barrier for already disadvantaged families.

Finally, some open enrollment programs place the onus of transportation on the student, reducing the school to an available option only if one can find the means of getting there. For students of poverty, the opportunity costs associated with transportation, such as fares for rides or parking, might prevent some schools from being viable options. Relying on public transportation often requires flexibility and a lengthier amount of time for travel, luxuries that students with economic hardship, caregiving responsibilities, or rigid work schedules, cannot afford (Pattillo, 2015). Another related consideration is the safety of neighborhoods traversed en route to school, especially at early morning and late afternoon or evening hours (Condliffe et al., 2015). Taken together, these concerns often result in a preference for schools in closer proximity to their residence, limiting families of poverty from taking full advantage of proposed school choice options.

Limited information. Critics of school choice policies argue the "rational choice" model of school selection (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 1990) implies that the process of choosing a school is a simple decision-making process requiring the gathering of information, evaluating of options, and selecting of a school (see Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014 for a critique). However, even the first step, the gathering of information, is a complex process experienced quite differently for various groups of people. On one level, low-income families might face financial constraints in their attempts to learn of their options—either the costs of Internet or the fares and time required to make school

visits might impact their ability to access information. Beyond the language barrier that inherently hinders information access, Stein and Nagro (2015) reported that the text complexity and readability of the school-choice guides provided by districts using open enrollment were written at levels inappropriate for their public audience, identifying yet another disadvantage for lower-educated parents. Smrekar and Honey (2015) found that lower-income parents relied more heavily on these formal information sources—schools, newspapers, and television—than higher-income, higher-educated parents, who tend to rely on well-informed social networks.

Thus, on another level, research suggests that a lack of social capital (Coleman, 1987) can impede the ability to navigate the educational system among lower income parents. Increasing trends of residential segregation along lines of race and especially class isolate communities and negatively impact their access to resources that can lift them out of poverty (Wilson, 2012). Latinxs, who are more likely to live in racially/ethnically isolated communities (Gándara, 2010; Orfield et al., 2012), have fewer opportunities to connect with "dissimilar peers" who might have additional insights and knowledge into the school choice process, and thus experience constraints in information sources (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). Broader social and professional networks of knowledge provide efficient and effective information channels advantage the already privileged in their search for the best schools for their children (Schneider et al., 2000).

Limited agency. Similarly, school administrators utilize their own social networks to strategize ways to recruit and keep students selectively, adding another level of complexity to the school choice process and yet another barrier for disadvantaged students to access higher-quality schools (Jennings, 2010). Recognizing the agency of

schools in systems of choice, Jennings' (2010) study draws attention to the unequal and preferential treatment that principals of high schools in New York City's open enrollment program give to students with high prior academic achievement and demonstrated "commitment." In Pattillo's (2015) interviews with low-income Black parents, this lack of agency, despite seemingly being in a position of empowerment, was prevalently voiced. Parents frequently reported upholding their "part of the bargain" (p. 60) by doing the research, contacting the schools, and submitting applications, yet many times they got "no response" back from the schools, had to make follow-up calls and visits, and ultimately were left with the same neighborhood school assignment.

In sum, the numerous barriers described above reveal the complexities of enacting policies of school choice, especially in respect to low-income families or families of color. Rather than an act of individual agency, decisions surrounding school choice are affected by systemic, contextual, and circumstantial factors that disproportionately impair marginalized populations from accessing the proposed improved alternatives. Darby and Saatcioglu (2015) succinctly argue the inherent inequity of school choice: "Social and material adversities such as persistent poverty and community instability may undermine parents' capacity to pursue high-quality options in the school choice market" (p. 63). These issues are reflective of the challenges described in the broader literature of parent involvement, as low-income families of nondominant culture struggle to engage compatibly with the norms and expectations of schools. For Latinxs in particular, there is a history of marginalization in their participation, as will be detailed in the following section.

The Latinx Perspective

Coinciding with the trend in increased school choice is the emphasis on involving parents in the educational attainment of their children. A component of the 2002 federal legislation *No Child Left Behind* made parent involvement plans a required component of Title I school programming, prompting schools with large populations of working-class students to consider the ways they could effectively engage their families in their child's education and contribute to efforts to close gaps in achievement (Auerbach & Collier, 2012). While there is general consensus of the academic benefits of parent involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Epstein et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Jeynes, 2003; Wilder, 2014), there is less agreement on the behaviors of parents that are most associated with increases in achievement (Auerbach, 2007; Calzada et al., 2015; Lareau, 1989; Valdez, 1996; Walker, 2016). Similar to assumptions of parent behavior in the school choice process (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015), conceptions of parent involvement are largely centered on White, middle- to upper-class norms, and contextual factors such as class, race/ethnicity, and family life shape the role parents play in their child's education (Goldenberg, 2014; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). With the influx of Latinxs over the past several decades, additional studies have examined the particularities of this group's involvement in education, revealing their unique contributions as well as the barriers they encounter. This body of literature offers insightful analysis of parents' beliefs and behaviors as they relate to their participation in school choice policies.

Latinx Parent Involvement

Because their educational support is largely imparted at the home, often less visible to teachers and administrators, Latinx parents have historically been criticized for their lack of parental involvement at schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Gallo, 2017; Orozco, 2008; Poza, Brookes, & Valdés, 2014; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Walker et al., 2011). Their lack of familiarity with the institution of schooling in the United States frequently impedes their participation, especially as they confront numerous structural barriers that mitigate their desire to be involved (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Poza et al., 2014). Without adequate bilingual staff and translating services of documents and messages, communication remains a significant barrier for many families only fluent in their native tongue. With recent heightened concerns of school security, policies requiring the showing of a driver's license or the registration as a volunteer (entailing background checks) for admittance into the building and classrooms further deter immigrant families from engaging with schools. Working class families face other challenges associated with poverty, such as transportation to/from the school, consistent phone and email access for communication, and residential instability. High mobility rates within the Latinx community also impair the establishment of solid social networks which could help families' knowledge of the educational system (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Ream, 2005).

Additionally, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997, 2005) model of the parental involvement process recognizes multiple factors affecting participation, emphasizing the importance of understanding parents' motivations that are largely driven by school and cultural contexts. Higher levels of self-efficacy, emanating from direct and

authentic invitations from teachers and children themselves to participate (Hoover-Dempsey & Sadler, 1995, 1997, 2005), along with perceptions that their contributions are valued (Orozco, 2008), are significant predictors of higher parental engagement (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Walker et al., 2011). For immigrant Latinxs in particular, a warm, welcoming school environment with consistent, positive invitations is instrumental to their involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Joseph, Vélez, & Antrop-González, 2017; Walker et al., 2011). Designing outreach with a strengths-based approach, rather than an orientation of deficit thinking, erodes subtle messages to Latinxs that their participation is not valued, and instead honors the group's "funds of knowledge" (González et al., 2005) and ways of supporting the education of their children (Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Orozco, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999; Walker et al., 2011). Orozco (2008) advocates for such an approach:

> All parents, regardless of class, ethnicity, gender, race, ability/disability, sexual orientation, or religious orientation, have a rich culture – including their history, language, and traditions – that deserves to be honored, respected, and cultivated. Valuing that background is the basis of a climate that welcomes and calls all parents to be involved in their children's schools. Involvement is a two-way process where parents are knowledgeable about what is taking place with their children's education, and educators understand, embrace, and seek input from the communities from which the children come. (p. 34)

Thus, understanding and honoring the cultural background and values of Latinxs is crucial to their participation. Unfortunately, many teachers lack the knowledge, experience, and understanding of the complexities of Latinx students' lives, particularly

in regards to topics normatively taboo in classrooms and preparation courses, such as immigration status and their impact on schooling (Gallo & Link, 2016).

Most recently, Gallo (2017) advances the reconceptualization of parent involvement by proposing a framework she calls *humanizing family engagement*. With aims of disrupting normative beliefs that minoritized families lack a value for education, on facet of her approach entails a critical examination of what counts as knowledge, education, and involvement, questioning how traditional conceptions of parent involvement build upon the resources and assets of diverse families. The second facet, ideological clarity of schooling, is closely connected in calling for educators to develop a critical consciousness towards the political and economic hierarchies of power and privilege latent in educational institutions as well as a careful analysis of how one's own beliefs and ideologies either maintain or challenge the status quo. Third, then, Gallo (2017) advocates for a more egalitarian family-school relationship with teachers assuming positions as learners, not experts, in a more open and shared space that invites contributions from the home into the classroom. Such a relationship can only be fostered by *confianza*, or mutual trust, between and among participants, particularly through a teacher's outreach and willingness to listen, share, and clearly communicate with students and their family members. This fourth facet in particular recognizes the responsibility of educators to engage collaboratively rather than to place the onus exclusively on parents to learn and adhere to practices and expectations set by the school.

Ethnographic research offers valuable insights into the cultural values shared by Latinxs, particularly in regard to education. With actions guided by *familismo*, the family serves a central, unifying bond within immediate members and also extends to a network

of close relationships and linkages outside the home (Valdés, 1996). Upholding the family's honor, respect, and cooperation among members is of extreme importance, and understanding the roles of family members and "demonstrating regard for the individual occupying that role" (Valdés, 1996, p. 130) is part of the *respeto* learned by children from an early age. While children hold a prominent position in the family, with all family members playing a part their raising and decisions often made considering what is best for them (Orozco, 2008), youth are expected to honor their elders with reverence and obedience. Parents are responsible for instilling such morals, distinguishing right from wrong, and teaching *buenos modales,* good manners. These lessons are often imparted in the form of *consejos*, or intimate, advice-giving narratives (Auerbach, 2007; Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Valdés, 1996). The Latinx conception of *educación* thus encompasses much more than the academic learning with which it is associated in the United States (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999).

In order to recognize the contributions of Latinx parents, advocates encourage educators to expand their definitions and normative conceptions of parent involvement (Auerbach, 2007; Gallo, 2017; Moreno & Valencia, 2011). While not a typical measure of the construct, the respect and responsiveness given to teachers by Latinx families is emblematic of their cultural values of *respeto* and *educación,* as parents take responsibility for their children's behavior at school and consider it a reflection on the family (Moreno & Valencia, 2011). Unfortunately, because Latinx parents tend to focus more on the moral and behavioral development of their children rather than the early academic skills which they trust educational professionals will provide, their forms of parental involvement are not held in as high regard (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Poza et al.,

2014; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Walker et al., 2011). However, though Latinx parents might be limited in their knowledge and capacity to be involved in the physical, traditional sense, the strong aspirations for education they convey to their children serve as valuable support for academic achievement. Since previous research has shown parental expectations to be one of the strongest correlations to academic achievement (Wilder, 2014), "the tone of parents' engagement—not necessarily parents' knowledge and use of specific academic skills—is among the most important variables to target (Auerbach & Collier, 2012; Jeynes, 2010)" (Walker, 2016, p. 345). Given the current educational context of an increasingly open marketplace in which parents are expected to be actively engaged, informed, and empowered to choose the school that is the best fit for their child (Kelly & McGuinn, 2012; Stevens et al., 2015), along with the growing trend of Latinx attendance of hypersegregated schools (Gándara, 2017), the findings from this research seem contradictory to what is needed to ensure high educational attainment.

One other focus of Latinx parent involvement literature is on outside programs and organizations that have proven successful in helping Latinx parents navigate the U.S. educational system (Calzada et al., 2015) and strengthen cultural notions of *tequío*, collective dedication (De La Fuente, 1989) or solidarity among immigrants (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) has supported numerous schools and partnerships designed to increase parent leadership, meanwhile enhancing parents' social and intellectual capital to enact change in their community (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011). Community-based programs that meet outside of schools offer a more inviting, comfortable environment void of the power

dynamics typically associated with traditional Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) that often stifle Latinx involvement (Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis (2012) describe the impact of one such program: "parents reported that they saw their education program as a unique, safe place for camaraderie and support, an environment where the participants could speak freely, in *confianza* (trust, comfort) and where to reconvene, strengthen their spirits, and articulate daily acts of resistance" (p. 80). Through informal and formal activities and meetings, these alternative projects allow parents the opportunity to participate in experiences of individual and collective empowerment, which promote the self-efficacy and communal dedication that can serve as valuable resources in improving the lives of marginalized youth of color, extending beyond concerns of raising test scores to transformation of greater societal inequities (Bolívar & Chrispeels, 2011; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012).

Latinx Participation in School Choice

Despite the wave of research pertaining to educational reform and the expanding educational marketplace, and despite the surge in Latinx enrollment in schools in the United States, there is a dearth of literature focused on Latinxs' participation in school choice. Previous research has considered Latinx choice patterns but primarily in their search for institutions of higher education (see Hernandez, 2015). A few studies have compared Latinx parent behavior with their Black, Asian, or White counterparts, helping to provide a more nuanced understanding of this particular ethnic group (Haynes et al., 2010; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). Because of the varying contexts of school choice, this body of literature is in great need of attention to provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of current policies on the Latinx population.

Analyses of Latinx schooling decisions reveals numerous complexities among intersections of economics, social spheres, language, and cultural values, suggesting that school choice is far from the simplistic rational process posited by market theorists (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Pearson, Wolgemuth, & Colomer, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). Similar to previous research of other racial/ethnic groups recognizing the correlation between income and participation in school choice (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999), Haynes, Goldring, and Phillips (2010) found that Latinxs engaged in choice in their application for magnet schools tended to be middle class and have higher educational background. Additionally, families having at least one second-generation parent proved advantageous in navigating the lottery process, as their English language skills were often more proficient and they had their own educational experiences in the country to help inform their decisions. Extended social networks of Latinxs who have been in the United States for a longer amount of time were instrumental in learning about the magnet system; newly immigrated Latinxs had to seek out in the information on their own. In this way, generation status adds a layer of complexity to school choice that was not experienced by their White and Black counterparts. Notably, Latinxs differed from other racial/ethnic groups in another aspect, their higher regard for the convenience of a school in their selection process. While academics and safety were primary factors cited across all groups, Latinxs more frequently noted the need for proximity, as difficulties securing work, transportation, residence, and other resources more heavily affected them than others (Haynes et al., 2010).

Thus, for working class immigrant Latinxs, the school selection process often deviated significantly from the parental behaviors assumed in school choice policies.

Several studies recognize that the Latinx student—not the typified parent—was responsible for rationalizing options and applying to schools (Cuero, Worthy, & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2009; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). Similar to findings in parent involvement literature, Latinx parents tended to provide moral support, not because of their indifference to education, but because of linguistic barriers limiting their knowledge of the system as well as their trust in professionals to provide quality education for their children (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). For some eighth graders facing high school applications, older siblings or cousins offered considerable assistance in the process, yet their support did not ensure selection of schools with higher-quality academics; reflecting the Latinx value of *familismo*, students often chose schools that were in the best interest of the family, either by convenience in location closer to home or familiarity of a school a sibling had previously attended (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). Cuero and colleagues (2009) also note this dilemma in their study of Latina middle school students deciding between a gifted magnet school program and their zoned TPS. Torn between the encouragement of teachers to pursue higher-quality educational opportunities at the magnet school and the pressure of peers and neighbors to remain in solidarity with their cultural group, these girls experienced enormous complexities in their school choice decision. Theoretical conceptions of the educational marketplace, emanating from normative, privileged perspectives, fail to recognize what it means for a student of color to leave her TPS and attend a school of choice where her language and culture may not be in the majority or even respected (Cuero et al., 2009).

Latinx parents, too, sense this tension, especially in the current social context that is often hostile to immigrants. Thus, in lieu of seeking a school with proven higher

academic achievement, Pearson and colleagues (2015) describe the rationale of some parents for opting instead for the community they felt at their current low-performing, bilingual magnet school, stating that "…the school was a refuge for Latino students, a place where families could escape from the overt and covert oppression they might find in White-dominated schools, a place where they could create their own counterstory" (p. 17). For Latinx parents who did choose an alternative option to their TPS, using a voucher to enroll their child at a religious private school, they faced an unwelcoming environment and a disregard for the efforts to participate in their child's education (Joseph et al., 2017). The school's normative conceptions of parent involvement did not recognize the cultural contributions of the Latinx families, and in turn, experienced low parental participation.

Finally, research finds that Latinx families often rely on differentiated sources of knowledge to make their schooling decisions (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). Like many other groups, they primarily rely on their social networks for information and advice about schools; however, immigrant Latinxs, particularly those who have recently entered the country, often have less extensive connections to people and resources in the community, especially if there is a language barrier that further restricts their access to people and data (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). Gastic and Coronado (2011) note that Latinxs are less likely than Whites or Blacks to consider schools beyond the one their child attends; thus, the underrepresentation of Latinxs in schools of choice may reflect their limited knowledge of their options. In a more detailed examination of the issues, Sattin-Bajaj (2014) studied the school selection process of two groups of honors students in the context of New York City's high school compulsory choice plan.

Compared to their higher-income Asian peers, low-income Latinx students made their decisions based on much more simplistic sources of information, relying primarily on the admissions criteria from the available directory to determine the academic rigor of schools they might attend. In contrast, the Asian students used multiple data points and cross-checked their conclusions with knowledgeable peers in order to identify the highest quality educational opportunities. The latter group also actively sought considerable consultation from school personnel who were influential in guiding their decisions, whereas the Latinx students received very little direct counseling or coaching, instead making the decisions on their own.

Differences in information channels, resources, and schooling experiences result in disparities in educational opportunities for Latinxs (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). In the case of New York City's open enrollment plan described above, nearly half of Latinx students were assigned the same zoned high school they would have attended without the option of choice, and only 13.5% of students received placement at a high-performing high school (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). In the case of the middle schoolers having to choose between a gifted magnet program and their neighborhood school, several Latinas experienced the disappointment of their teachers in adhering to familial concerns of transportation and security when choosing to attend the lower-performing TPS (Cuero et al., 2009). And finally, in the case of the families choosing to remain at a lower-achieving dual-language elementary school, an environment that embraced their culture, language, and heritage was deemed more important than the outcomes of standardized tests (Pearson et al., 2015). Despite the linguistic and cultural assets that Latinx children could bring to dual-language immersion or popular International Baccalaureate programs, this

group is underrepresented in magnet school enrollment and increasingly segregated in their neighborhood public schools (Gándara & Aldana, 2014). These numerous complexities contribute to inequitable access to educational opportunities that school choice is purported to enhance.

Summary

In this chapter I have presented a comprehensive review of the extensive body of literature pertaining to school choice and Latinx parent involvement. After presenting a brief background of the development of the market-based educational movement, I highlighted findings from previous research evaluating the major tenets of school choice policies, their ability to improve outcomes across all educational sectors and to offer parents an increasingly customized schooling experience for their child. Empirical studies offer inconclusive evidence of gains in student achievement and point to the growing trends of racial and economic segregation emanating from increased school choice options. Furthermore, research indicates numerous contextual factors affecting families' participation and benefit from the expanded marketplace, with marginalized populations facing considerably more barriers in their search for high-quality education. This is particularly true for Latinx families, whose unique cultural, linguistic, social, and economic backgrounds influence their schooling decisions in ways that vary from the normative expectations of choice policies. Although their enrollment in public schools across the United States is steadily increasing, their participation in choice schools is often limited and impedes equitable access to quality schools. Because few empirical studies focus on this sector of the population, there is a great need for more comprehensive understanding of the behaviors and decisions of Latinx families across

various nationalities, generations, and social classes. This study aims to begin to fill this void in the literature.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

The previous literature review on school choice revealed a lack of research about Latinx families' participation in the process. With the rise of market-based educational reform expanding schooling options beyond the traditional public school (TPS) and theoretically driving the improvement of students' academic achievement (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 2009; Hess & Manno, 2011; Hoxby, 2003; Jeynes, 2014; Stevens et al., 2015), a better understanding of the behaviors and decisions of families from a range of social backgrounds is needed to aid evaluations of the equity of educational opportunities created by these reforms. Because Latinx students comprise the fastest growing sector of the public school population (NCES, 2015) and face considerable challenges in obtaining high educational outcomes (Gándara, 2017), their perspective needs to be understood as it relates to the impact of these educational reform efforts. This study sought to contribute to the literature by providing a detailed examination of the school choice process as experienced by the Latinx population in Mecklenburg County. The following questions guided this research:

1) How do Latinx families in Mecklenburg County navigate school choice options and select a school for their child's education?
2) How do these decision-making processes vary within the Latinx community?

3) Does school choice advance greater access to high-quality education for Latinx families in Mecklenburg County? If so, how? If not, why?

Research Design

Because I sought to investigate a contemporary, complex social phenomenon while retaining "a holistic and real-world perspective" (Yin, 2014, p. 4), I employed a descriptive case study design for this study. Understanding the process of Latinx parents' school selection involved numerous contextual conditions; thus, the naturalistic and comprehensive approach afforded by the case study methodology was most effective for collecting and analyzing empirical research. Additionally, employing a case study approach allowed me to conduct an in-depth inquiry through the use of multiple sources of data. I integrated ethnographic methods such as participant observation and intensive interviews, which permitted me to generate the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) that not only helped capture an insider's perspective of a particular group, but also guided me in formulating findings and theoretical insights. The case under investigation in this study, Latinx parents' decision-making process of choosing a school for their child's enrollment, was bounded both by group—Latinxs—and by location—Mecklenburg County. Establishing these boundaries allowed me to analyze the broad phenomenon within specific constraints so that I could reasonably meet the research objectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003).

Site Selection

While I selected the site of this study, Mecklenburg County, out of convenience because of my residence, I also had intimate knowledge of the local context, both the school system and the broader community. This broad knowledge aided this

investigation. Beyond this, Mecklenburg County served as a strategic site for two additional reasons: the hypergrowth of its Latinx population and its recent shifts towards increasing choice options in state and local policy.

As part of a booming metropolitan area experiencing double-digit growth in percent population, Mecklenburg County is home to just over a million residents in the city of Charlotte and its five surrounding municipalities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the state of North Carolina, this county is one of the most racially diverse. Since 2012, people of color have outnumbered the White population in Mecklenburg County. Still the largest racial/ethnic group, Whites constitute 47.7% of the population, Blacks 32.7%, Hispanics 13%, Asian 5.8%, and mixed races 2.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The most striking shift in county demographics is the growth of the Latinx population, which doubled in size of percentage population between 2000 and 2010 and has continued to grow (Fyler, 2016). This surge in Latinxs is also evident in enrollment numbers of Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), as it is the only racial group increasing its presence. Over the last three years, district diversity reports indicate that Whites and Blacks have slowly decreased in the district's population while Latinxs have steadily increased by a full percentage point (CMS, 2017a).

The school district as a whole has experienced a slower growth in enrollment over the last 20 years as additional schooling options have been introduced. While private school enrollment has remained fairly consistent around 12%, both charter and homeschool options have increased in popularity, resulting in the decreases in CMS (Lane & Hawn Nelson, 2015). Following the state's opening of its first charter schools in the fall of 1998, and especially its lifting of the 100-school cap in 2011, enrollment in

charter schools has risen swiftly across the state. In one year alone, from the school year of 2012-2013 to 2013-2014, an additional 20 charters opened, and enrollment increased by 14% (NCES, 2015). According to data retrieved from the North Carolina Departments of Administration (n.d.) and Public Education ("Data and Reports," n.d.), as of 2016-2017, in Mecklenburg County 7% of students were enrolled in charter schools, 10% in private, 5.0% in home schools, and 78% in CMS. Again, these trends in school choice preference mirror those of the country described in chapter one.

In May of 2017, the CMS Board approved revisions to the district's pupil assignment plan, amidst contentious debate from various sectors of the community. The revisions were the most recent in a history of important decisions regarding student assignment. Known across the nation for the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* litigation of 1971 in which the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the district's use of mandatory busing for school desegregation, CMS was once a model of racial balance and educational outcomes (Mickelson, Smith, & Hawn Nelson, 2015). Nearly three decades later, following a new lawsuit (*Capacchione*) that reopened the original *Swann* case, the judge determined the district had reached unitary status and a desegregation plan was no longer needed. He vacated the *Swann* decision and the district introduced a race-neutral pupil assignment plan to replace the mandatory desegregation plan. Named the Family Choice Plan, it employed a combination of magnet schools and "home schools," an assignment based on the child's residence (Mickelson et al., 2015). Following the implementation of this new plan in 2002, segregation by race and socioeconomics jumped across the district and has continued to remain at high levels (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2015). A recent study (Hawn Nelson, Lane, Marcus, &

Alvarado, 2016) suggests that the closely intertwined housing and education markets maintain residential choice as the primary form of participation in school choice, with White, higher-income families more likely to exercise their schooling options.

Also in the 1990s, the magnet school system underwent a dramatic change in design. Originally part of the district's desegregation plan as a form of voluntary segregation, its focus shifted to using its particular themes and programs to match students' interests and learning preferences (CMS, "History of CMS", n.d.). Students applied through a lottery system and, following the *Capacchione* decision, race could not be used as a factor for placement. A recent report produced by CMS in conjunction with consultants from Magnet Schools of America (2015) found that the district's magnets "show limited evidence of diversity reflective of the district and community," especially in reference to representation of English Language Learners (ELLs) and exceptional children (EC).

Given these various data points and reports on the increasing segregation of the district's schools, coupled with declines in shares of enrollment due to the rise in charter and home school popularity (Lane & Hawn Nelson, 2015), the current school board faced challenging contexts in developing its goals for the revised pupil assignment plan. Furthermore, a report listing Charlotte as last out of 50 large cities across the nation for social mobility (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014) placed additional focus on the city's education system. Various factions of parents ostensibly voiced their respective interests, with large numbers advocating heavily for preserving assignment at neighborhood schools, others imploring increased educational equity for marginalized groups, and still others lobbying for expanding the magnet school system. Ultimately, the

school board approved a complicated plan with combinations of strategies intended to break up concentrations of poverty across the area. Among these initiatives are a newly designed weighted lottery for magnet schools to offer low-income students elevated priority in admissions, three pairings of neighborhood elementary schools to create more diverse K-2 and 3-5 buildings, and several changes to school boundaries to create more economically balanced student bodies. Many students were unaffected by changes in the assignment plan. Slated to be implemented in the 2018-2019 school year, the effects of this new policy on diversity, parent empowerment, and achievement have yet to be seen.

Participants

The criteria for participation in this study included (1) self-identified Latinxs who (2) reside in Mecklenburg County and (3) are responsible for enrolling a child in a K-12 school. Because I sought to give attention to the diversity of Latinxs, particularly those of lower income families zoned for lower performing schools, I focused on recruiting participants from different school feeder patterns in separate areas of the county that included schools identified by the district as consistently low-performing. Having lived in the area and taught for the local school district for over a decade, I utilized convenience sampling among the personal contacts I had acquired from working with low- and middle-income Latinx families. A pilot study was conducted with seven families whose children currently or previously had attended Moore Elementary (pseudonym) in the southern sector of the county. The study was then expanded to include five additional families in a similar area but were zoned for Cypress Elementary, one that is uniquely comprised predominantly of Latinxs. From the eastern part of the county, where there is also a dense immigrant population, another five families were recruited using a personal

contact who had worked in the community at Hillside Elementary for several years and was highly respected and trusted. Using these individuals with whom I had already developed a trusted relationship, I employed a snowball sampling approach, asking participants to suggest other potential candidates for the study. Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide demographic information of participating Latinx families.

Table 4: Participant demographics for Cypress Elementary feeder pattern

Family Name	*First Name*	*Country of Origin*	*Duration in U.S.*	*Education*	*English Proficiency*	*Family in U.S.*	*Child(ren) (grade)*
Hernandez	Carla (mother)	El Salvador	11 years	4th Grade	4	sister, aunt, "lots"	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 4 3 - Grade K 4 - age 3
Lopez	Natalia (mother)	Mexico		High school	1	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 3 3 - Grade K 4 - age 3
Morales	Elena (mother)	Honduras		6th Grade	4	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 3 3 - age 3
Gonzalez	Perla (mother)	Mexico	17 years	6th Grade	5		1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade K
Castillo	Sofía (mother)	Nicaragua	11 years	4th Grade	4	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 4 3 - Grade 3

*Self-reported level of proficiency, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being fully proficient

Table 3: Participant demographics for Hillside Elementary feeder pattern

Family Name	*First Name*	*Country of Origin*	*Duration in U.S.*	*Education*	*English Proficiency**	*Family in U.S.*	*Child(ren) (grade)*
Sanchez	Romina (mother)	El Salvador	16 years	K-8th (El Salv.) 9th-11th (U.S.)	8/9	Mother, 2 sisters, 3 brothers	1 - Grade 6 2 - Grade 2 3 - age 2
Escobar	Julia (mother)	Mexico	17 years	High school	5 10	Sister	1 - Grade 11 2 - Grade 9 3 - Grade 6
Santos	Maria (mother)	Mexico	23 years	High school	6 10	None	1 - graduate 2 - graduate 3 - Grade 9 4 - Grade 6
Martinez	Alejandra (mother)	Mexico	15 years	High school	5	Sister	1 - Grade 9
Ramos	Ana (mother) Lucas (father)	Guatemala El Salvador	12 years	High school	6	Cousin & wife	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade K 3 - Grade PK

*Self-reported level of proficiency, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being fully proficient

Table 4: Participant demographics for Cypress Elementary feeder pattern

Family Name	*First Name*	*Country of Origin*	*Duration in U.S.*	*Education*	*English Proficiency*	*Family in U.S.*	*Child(ren) (grade)*
Hernandez	Carla (mother)	El Salvador	11 years	4th Grade	4	sister, aunt, "lots"	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 4 3 - Grade K 4 - age 3
Lopez	Natalia (mother)	Mexico		High school	1	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 3 3 - Grade K 4 - age 3
Morales	Elena (mother)	Honduras		6th Grade	4	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 3 3 - age 3
Gonzalez	Perla (mother)	Mexico	17 years	6th Grade	5		1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade K
Castillo	Sofía (mother)	Nicaragua	11 years	4th Grade	4	None	1 - Grade 5 2 - Grade 4 3 - Grade 3

*Self-reported level of proficiency, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being fully proficient

Other participants in this study included school personnel who work with Latinx parents and could offer an additional perspective and insight into the school choice process. Two Communities in Schools[2] site coordinators, a school counselor, and a family advocate were asked to share their experiences relaying information and guidance with families as they make decisions regarding their child's enrollment in school. Having these insights from an administrative perspective helped fill any knowledge gaps in the process and provided a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

The participants described above were a valuable source of data. In order to provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under study, I followed Yin (2014), who suggests strengthening a case study by collecting multiple sources of evidence, in addition to gathering information through interviews with the participants mentioned above. Thus, I utilized data collection techniques of document analysis and participant observation. These methods are further described in the following sections.

Documents. Written, recorded material, public archival records and documents proved to be an advantageous source of insight for me into the school choice process. These materials served to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2014). The stable nature of the source was beneficial as it allowed me to easily move back and forth between analysis, interpretation, and reconceptualization as they were constantly being referred to during the interpretation process (Prior, 2003; Yin,

[2] Communities in Schools (CIS) is a national organization aimed to empower students "to stay in school and achieve in life." Through a school-based site coordinator, CIS connects community resources with schools and the students that need them most. For more information, please visit https://www.communitiesinschools.org/

2014). These were the additional documents that I analyzed as sources of evidence: county demographic reports, district and school websites, school report cards and demographic data, online application and enrollment forms, as well as printed flyers and advertisements obtained through public access or participants in the study. These materials provided me valuable insight not just from the information they directly contained, but the clues they indirectly conveyed, as Mogalakwe (2006) explains that documents "are not deliberately produced for the purpose of research, but naturally occurring objects with a concrete or semi-permanent existence which tell us indirectly about the social world of the people who created them" (p. 222). Similarly, Yin (2014) reminds researchers that documents were written for a specific purpose other than the case study being done; thus, a critical analysis enabled me to elicit meaning and gain understanding into the phenomenon as these objectives were identified. Knowing that, in this case, these documents were already created to communicate with and inform parents of their schooling options, the written texts served as representation of marketing efforts on the part of schools. Following Yin (2014), I aimed to "listen" to implicit messages (p. 74) potentially sent to parents of various backgrounds. By using multiple, diverse sources of evidence, I was able to triangulate data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), an approach that can strengthen the validity of case study findings (Yin, 2014).

Interviews. Because I intended to collect descriptive accounts to understand parents' selection of schools in Mecklenburg County and the factors influencing their decisions, an interview served as an instrumental tool in gathering this data. The planned interviews expanded upon a pilot study of seven families from southern Charlotte belonging to the same school feeder pattern. I interviewed five families from another

sector of the city, eastern Charlotte, which is home to a large immigrant population, in order to compare and more completely understand the case under study. An interview allowed participants the opportunity to directly share their knowledge, experiences, and feelings with me, providing insight into this phenomenon of school selection through the perceptions of parents themselves. As conceptualized in research literature, an interview is an interactive process in which together the interviewer and interviewee co-construct meaning around the theme in focus (Fontana & Frey, 2002; Kvale & Brinkman, 2008; Warren, 2001). As the researcher, I could then interpret and analyze the descriptions produced through active participation on the part of both parties (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Understanding the interview as being socially constructed, my role required careful questioning and active listening in order to openly perceive the descriptions and meaning offered by the participant. From this phenomenological approach, it was also important for me as the interviewer to set aside any preconceived notions related to the topic, focusing on making meaning from the conversation of the interview itself (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008).

As previously mentioned, establishing rapport was extremely important under the current social contexts of the country, and required extra consideration in this case study of Latinx families. Parents were interviewed at a location of their choice, which was determined to be their home in each of the cases. The familiar and comfortable setting helped bridge the distance between me as the researcher and the participant, a beneficial context for gaining an insider perspective (Patton, 2015).

The duration of the interview varied greatly, often depending on the relationship with the participant; they ranged from 15 minutes to two hours, with most lasting

somewhere in the middle (about 45 minutes). Although Yin (2014) suggests such an intensive interview adopt a conversational, unstructured approach, in this study I diverged slightly to utilize a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix A). This permitted me to focus the conversation on school choice and consider certain aspects pertaining to the research questions and its theoretical traditions. I then used follow-up questions as necessary to probe more deeply, describe, clarify, and interpret knowledge and perceptions (Maxwell, 2013). The deliberate sequence of the interview guide followed a funnel approach (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008), beginning with indirect questions related to the participant's child(ren) and general experiences with American schools, leading into more direct questions pertaining to perceptions of school choice. This again helped me set a cordial tone for the interview yet contributed both dynamically and thematically to the knowledge production of the interview.

All interviews were conducted in their preferred language of the participant (English or Spanish). During the pilot study interviews, I spoke to the parent(s) in Spanish, often with the children present to contribute and clarify responses. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated verbatim. A second translator evaluated the transcript for accuracy, identifying words or phrases that might carry differences in meaning; these variations or inconsistencies were examined in the original interview, discussed, and revised to reduce interpreter bias and increase the validity of the source (Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, & Maliski, 2008). During subsequent interviews with families from Hillside and Cypress elementary, a native Latina translator accompanied me to participants' houses, which aided in communication and rapport, since I had no previous relationship with these families. This process also facilitated the transcription of

interviews verbatim in English, eliminating the need for certification of the translated transcripts. To aid consistency in the presentation of participants' responses, all direct quotes in this dissertation appear in English; transcripts of the Spanish-language interviews are available upon request.

Participant observations. I collected a third source of data through participant observation, a method that allowed me the opportunity to directly experience and engage in events related to school choice. By assuming a role in the field, I could directly observe participants in a naturalistic setting and obtain insights into "into people's views and actions, as well as the nature (that is, sights, sounds) of the location they inhabit" (Reeves, Kuper, & Hodges, 2008, p. 512). Schools and districts frequently held open houses and informational fairs to assist parents in the school decision process, but rather than relying on documents to convey information about the events or interviews to describe the experiences of attending, a participant observation allowed me an immersion into the context of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, I gained the ability to "perceive reality from the viewpoint of someone 'inside' a case rather than external to it" (Yin, 2014, p. 117).

I attended a city/county wide school informational fair held at the local minor league ballpark and another at a regional branch of the public library. Participating representatives at these sessions offered information from their respective private, charter, magnet, and TPSs. Additionally, I attended an open house of one of the TP middle schools under examination in this study as well as one of the magnet middle schools. Because one of the participating families from the pilot study had no knowledge of schooling options beyond their TPS, I took the mother and three children to the magnet

middle school and then an information session at the district Family Center, where they received assistance completing the magnet school application. Though my intervention introduced direct researcher bias in this family's engagement with school choice, I considered the potential benefit to the family in applying to a school aligned with the student's academic strengths and interests and the advantage to me of observing firsthand a family's introduction to the school choice process. Finally, one of the TP elementary schools offered a support session for parents to apply to the magnet school lottery. While attending this event, I also observed families deliberating magnet options and completing the application. By composing descriptive field notes before, during, and after each of the events described, I could corroborate data collected from participant observations with other sources of evidence, using triangulation methods to generate robust findings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010).

Data Analysis

Due to the large quantity of data gathered from the multiple collection methods, the analysis of a case study requires careful organization, intentional planning, and systematic use of analytical tools (Yin, 2014). Furthermore, analysis must begin concurrently with data collection, as analysis is a dynamic, iterative, and inductive process that constantly requires the analyst to make sense of the data in order to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). During each instance of data collection, I recorded detailed notes or voice memos, which were immediately typed or transcribed following the event. To spur the reflection and conceptualization processes that help derive patterns and conclusions, I created memos to capture thoughts, questions, and tentative themes or hypotheses that surfaced while transferring and rereading notes

(Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The comments feature of Microsoft Word was helpful in embedding memos into each field note/transcript/document while separating observations from opinions or analysis.

During this concurrent data collection and analysis period, I also began rereading data using the process of open coding, reading line by line, assigning key words or phrases to meaningful units of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Looking for commonalities or relationships among these units of data, I advanced into the process of analytical coding, moving beyond descriptive codes to strategically group data into analytical categories that reconstruct meaning in a new way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I kept a running list of these codes in a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel, where I could easily reference and revise the codes to more accurately describe the connection to the particular word or phrase. In this sense, while attempting to be analytical, I could also try to remain close to my data (Charmaz, 2014). Continuing with each instance of data collection, I revisited and revised these codes to look for recurring regularities and ensured conceptual consistency and accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) aided ongoing analysis of data throughout the collection process and strengthened the development of my findings in accordance with the purpose of the study. Importantly, throughout these iterations I paused to consider the influence of my subjectivities in these interpretations and to filter them out to the best extent possible. Planning these systematic checks helped minimize bias and maximized accuracy in the final case study report (Patton, 2015; Peshkin, 1998).

Once data collection reached a point of saturation in which no new insights were forthcoming, I entered a period of intensive analysis in which I attempted to make

meaning of all the collected data to answer the proposed research questions. Yin (2014) offers several general strategies for case study data analysis, including the use of theoretical propositions to guide the examination. Because this study was situated in a framework of three theories (market theory of choice, reproduction theory, and LatCrit), this method of analysis proved fruitful in yielding findings related to the theoretical underpinnings and previous literature on the topic. Revisiting my list of analytical categories, I expanded the spreadsheet into a codebook to organize data across multiple sources and considered emerging themes in light of theoretical conceptions. Following multiple cycles of constant comparative analysis, I was able to identify numerous categories that emerged as a few key themes in the data. Thus, this codebook not only aided analysis as a visual display of the connections between data and findings, but also served as an audit trail to enhance trustworthiness of the study. I created additional charts, tables, and matrices as I manipulated data in search of patterns and relationships among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994); Appendix B contains an example of one such matrix that supports triangulation across various collection techniques by connecting research questions to multiple sources of data.

Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality

As the researcher, I assumed the ethical responsibility of ensuring there was no physical, psychological, economic, or legal risks associated with participation in this study. Interview audio files contained the names of the interview participants; however, all names were replaced with pseudonyms at the time of transcription to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. All informed consent forms and interview transcription notes were separated and coded before data analysis. Following the

interviews, consent forms and audio files containing identifiable information were stored either in a locked file cabinet located in the faculty advisor's office or in a laptop computer that required a security passcode, then recordings were destroyed following the completion of the study. As previously noted, careful consideration and sensitivity were given to the current social contexts, particularly in regard to participants' immigration status. To ensure utmost transparency and assurance, the consent form explicitly stated that participants would not be asked about their immigration status at any part of this study. In telling their background, participants often shared their generation status along with nationality, but I did not inquire about documentation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the results of this study were both valid and reliable to the extent possible with its qualitative design, various techniques were employed to achieve high standards of rigor and establish trustworthiness. First, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview protocol. Seven Latinx families participated; all were personal contacts of mine from previous teaching experience, living in southern Charlotte in a common school feeder pattern. The following themes emerged from the pilot study that informed the current study: (a) high engagement in school choice options at the middle school level in response to dissatisfaction with the zoned school; (b) families sought alternative options largely through the district's magnet school system; only one family obtained knowledge of charter schools and one attempted to inquire of private school scholarship opportunities; (c) birth order was highly influential, as older siblings served as gatekeepers to admission processes, either as help completing forms or in their own acceptance and, consequently, future admission for younger siblings; (d) social capital in

the form of shared neighborhood knowledge influenced many families to seek magnet schools to escape zoned middle school; (e) most families did not follow the normative selection process outlined by the district's website, as limited research of schools was conducted and students themselves often led decisions; (f) limitations of affordable, safe housing options prevented many families from moving to expand educational opportunities; (g) a majority of families were from Mexico and had lived in the United States for 10 years or more; the family with lower levels of literacy (on account of their nativity in El Salvador) and social capital was at a severe disadvantage in knowing about schooling options.

Additionally, the trustworthiness of this study was enhanced with the ethical manner in which it will be conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation of data is evidenced by the matrix in Appendix B showing the multiple sources that were used to answer each research question. Member checks and transcript translation reviews ensured interview data reflected participants' words as accurately as possible and ensured respondent validation of developing findings (Maxwell, 2013). These transcripts, along with my codebook, served as an audit trail to visibly trace the generation of research findings, aiding credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) of their construction and limiting the influence of my own subjectivities (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, throughout the simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis, I employed investigator triangulation, presenting and discussing observations and emerging themes with colleagues so that alternative explanations could be considered and, ultimately, final interpretations were consistent and congruent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the final case study report I included the rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973)

of the setting, participants, and findings as a strategy to enable transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A final technique I used for assuring the rigor of this work was researcher reflexivity, the examination and explication of my biases, orientations, and assumptions in regard to this topic (Peshkin, 1998; Watt, 2007), which I elaborate upon in the next section.

Researcher Positionality

In the early formulation of this project, I reflected on an experience I had attending a middle school open house. I share this in calling to light the subjectivities I hold in terms of racial, cultural, economic, social, and linguistic privileges, educational experiences and expertise, and an empathetic, social justice-oriented approach to issues:

As I exited the building out into the light morning mist, my head was swimming with thoughts and impressions of the last hour. I was impressed with the principal, her experience, and her vision for the school. She was articulate, compassionate, and certainly knew how to market her school to the clientele at the open house. I was reminded of my own years in her shoes, not as an administrator, but as a teacher, facilitator, and community outreach liaison for our elementary school, constantly working to spread a sense of pride in our students, teachers, and families. With less than stellar proficiency scores on state mandated tests, a majority minority population, and Title I status, our school had held similar open houses, seeking to appeal to the White, middle class residents of the neighborhood who were often hesitant, if at all willing, to consider enrolling their child at their traditionally zoned school. The messages were similar: we're not a scary place, we've got great plans to turn around the academic performance of the school, we take pride in our demographic diversity, our staff is

prepared and eager to challenge your child, and we can't do this without your support and resources. I was encouraged by the other adults I had met that morning: though there were only about 10 others besides myself, one included my neighbor who lived two houses down, and another turned out to be both a current neighbor and a former one—we had grown up just a few streets away from each other in a city about an hour and a half away. Some of the parents had been wearing shirts from the neighborhood elementary school, and from the show of hands requested by the principal, nearly all either had, or planned to have, our kids attend our zoned school. I was interested to see the progress the school could make in the 11 years before my 18-month-old would be ready to potentially walk its halls.

Balancing my parent hat and my researcher hat, I turned back to hold the door for another parent exiting behind me. She had come in about 15 minutes late and had missed the opening talk by the principal. I was interested in getting her perspective, so I asked, "Que piensa de la escuela?" [What do you think of the school?] She was the only Latina parent, had relied on one of the eighth grade student ambassadors to translate, and had had minimal engagement with the group as we had toured the school. Towards the end of the event, I had initiated some small talk in Spanish, complimenting her on the polite behavior of her two-year-old who was accompanying us around the building. She shrugged as she responded to me, "Está bien. Mi otro hijo vino acá."[It's okay. My other son went here a few years ago." As we continued our conversation into the parking lot, I realized she was the only parent in our group with a fifth grader who might actually attend the school the following year, yet she had gotten the least amount of attention and information from the session. When I asked if she was considering other schools, she

explained that with several other children at home, figuring out transportation to other schools was challenging, so she really wasn't able to explore other options. Feeling rather useless and privileged, I offered what I could—some encouragement: "La directora me parece muy buena."[The principal seems really great.] She nodded and we exchanged a few more pleasantries and best wishes before getting into our respective cars and heading back to our respective lives.

According to Peshkin (1998), to enhance the validity of this work, it was necessary to acknowledge not only the inherent subjectivity embedded in the processes of this qualitative research, gathering multiple sources of data and attempting to construct interpretations of the data, but furthermore to identify the particular subjectivities that I held and could potentially influence the study. By systematically monitoring these subjectivities throughout the duration of the study, I aimed to reduce biases that might alter or limit a more complete interpretation of this case. As previously indicated, during iterative cycles of data collection and analysis, I reexamined emerging themes, questions, and reflections to check for the influence of partiality on the part of my particular orientations. As suggested by Watt (2007), by keeping a research journal I could include documentation of my feelings and reactions and remain cognizant of the comments, ideas, and situations that triggered strong emotion. By putting them in writing, I could keep them separate from analyses and interpretations. These methods, along with the investigator triangulation afforded by committee members offering feedback on my work, helped minimize biases and enhanced the trustworthiness of this study.

Limitations

As common in case study research, a limitation in this project is the generalizability of my findings, as the themes and conclusions drawn from this study are unique to the particular case of Latinxs in Mecklenburg County. However, as Merriam (2009) notes, findings from this study contribute to the knowledge base of the field, and "insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research" (p. 40). It is my hope that readers are able to make extrapolations (Patton, 2015) in consideration of the application of findings to their own respective contexts and conditions. While attempting to capture a holistic picture of the phenomenon under study, as a single individual researcher I am limited by time, resources, and particularly the linguistic skills to most comprehensively and accurately portray all the experiences and contextual factors involved. Although I intended to interview Latinx families until data saturation was met, as the lone investigator, many decisions and collection activities were solely my undertaking, and therefore limited to my abilities and expertise (Merriam, 2009). In particular, the resources of time and money required to continue additional interviews while obtaining translation certification (as done with the pilot study) or coordinating an accompanying translator (as done with subsequent interviews) to ensure accuracy of participants' statements limited the number of participants.

Interviews relied on convenience and snowball sampling, thus only those with whom I had come into contact with through previous work experiences or social networks were able to participate and inform this work. With study participation largely stemming from their existing connections to school personnel, these families may overrepresent levels of involvement of typical Latinx parents. The participants are not,

therefore, representative of the entire population of Latinxs in Mecklenburg County, let alone the state or country, but these recruitment and sampling techniques do take into consideration important demographic patterns to better reflect their population. Nonetheless, this study serves as a valuable contribution to the field in offering the perspectives of Latinx families, as their voices are underrepresented in the current body of literature. It can serve as a starting point for future research that is more representative of the larger population.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to provide a nuanced examination of the experiences of Latinx families in Mecklenburg County navigating school choice and to discuss equity implications of these findings. Through a descriptive case study design, I examined this phenomenon of school choice holistically and naturalistically. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews of Latinx families and school personnel, document analysis of materials relevant to the school choice process in the county, and participant observation of events informing the public of school choice options. These multiple sources of data were analyzed as they were collected, using various levels of coding techniques and the constant comparative method to evaluate emerging patterns and themes. In this study I have carefully outlined ethical considerations as well as strategies to enhance trustworthiness so that the findings I generated serve as a valuable contribution to the field and offer implications that can inform the development of equitable policies and educational opportunities for Latinx students.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to report the major findings of the study. In analyzing the schooling decisions of families for each of their children, I identified two major patterns emerging from the data, which can be seen in Tables 5, 6, and 7. First, there was a trend in relation to students' grade levels and their enrollment in schools. Nearly all families attended their traditional public school (TPS) through the elementary grades. Recognizing that families were not even considering other sectors of the educational marketplace until middle or high school, I unpack the contexts and reasons behind this trend in the first part of the chapter. Second, when Latinx families in this study did begin to explore additional options, there was a discernable pattern in their decision-making process that largely only included magnet schools. Despite the expansion of choice policies in North Carolina and Mecklenburg County, only one family broke into the charter sector and only one other attempted to pursue the private sector. This trend is explicated further in the second half of the chapter. Interpreted through the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, these findings reveal the inequitable value of families' respective cultural assets when they compete in a market-based educational system rooted in social and economic privilege.

Table 5: Schooling decisions by participants in Moore Elementary feeder pattern

Participant	*Current Grade*	*Elementary*	*Other Option*	*Middle*	*Other Option*	*High*	*Other Option*
Bryan	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	TPS	-
Yazmin	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	TPS	-
Cynthia	8th	TPS	-	Charter	magnet		
Stefanie	7th	TPS	-	Charter	magnet		
Oscar	5th	Charter (Gr. 4)	TPS				
Cristian	8th	TPS	-	TPS (-)*	magnet	TPS[!]	magnet
Raquel	6th	TPS	-	TPS (-)	magnet		
Rodrigo	4th	TPS	-				
Mateo	10th	TPS	-	magnet (LA)		magnet (LA)	
Gabriela	8th	TPS	-	magnet (LA)			
Eva	6th	TPS	-	magnet (LA)			
Jose	3rd	TPS	-				
Andrea	graduate	bilingual*		magnet (LA)		magnet (LA)	
Raymundo	6th	magnet/TPS**		magnet (LA)			
Kevin	6th	magnet/TPS**		magnet (LA)			
Nico	5th	TPS	-	magnet (STEM)	TPS		
Oscar	4th	TPS	-				
Francisco	age 3						
Franco	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	TPS	-
Carolina	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	TPS	-
Lucia	11th	TPS	-	magnet (IB)		TPS	magnet
Miguel	8th	TPS	-	TPS (-)	magnet, private	TPS[!]	magnet
Angel	2nd	TPS	-				
Luisa	PreK						

*(-) *applied but did not get into magnet school*

** *gained entry into magnet but switched to TPS*

[!] *previously applied to magnets in middle school, but with change in school assignment, did not in high school*

Table 6: Schooling decisions by participants in Hillside Elementary feeder pattern

Participant	*Current Grade*	*Elementary*	*Other Option*	*Middle*	*Other Option*	*High*	*Other Option*
Jason	6th	TPS	-	magnet (IB)			-
Raul	2nd	TPS	-				-
Edgar	age 2						
Jacquie	11th	TPS	-	TPS		magnet (HS)	TPS
Brenda	9th	TPS	-	TPS		magnet (IB)	TPS
Diana	6th	TPS	-	TPS (-)*	magnet		
Jennifer	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	magnet (STEM)	TPS
Andrea	graduate	TPS	-	TPS	-	magnet (STEM)	TPS
Joslyn	9th	TPS	-	TPS	-	magnet (HS)	TPS
Ana	5th	TPS	-	TPS	magnet		
Jonathan	9th	TPS	-	TPS	-	magnet (HS)	TPS
Roberto	5th	TPS	-	TPS			
Javiera	K	TPS	-				
Emily	PreK	bilingual					

*(-) *applied but did not get into magnet school*

Table 7: Schooling decisions by participants in Cypress Elementary feeder pattern

Participant	*Current Grade*	*Elementary*	*Other Option*	*Middle*	*Other Option*	*High*	*Other Option*
Steve	5th	TPS	-	magnet (STEM)			
Juan	4th	TPS	-				
Bella	K	TPS	-				
Mia	age 3						
Josue	5th	TPS	-	TPS (-)*	magnet		
Sebastian	3rd	TPS	-				
Ofelia	K	TPS	-				
Simon	age 3						
Anthony	5th	TPS	-	TPS (-)	magnet		
Patricia	3rd	TPS					
Karyn	age 3						
Hector	5th	TPS	-	TPS (-)	magnet		
Ben	K	TPS	-				
Nicolas	5th	TPS	-	TPS (-)	magnet		
Marco	4th	TPS	-				
Cristofer	3rd	TPS	-				

*(-) *applied but did not get into magnet school*

Part One: Entering the Marketplace by Leveraging Cultural Assets

The timing of Latinx families' participation in school choice emerged as a key theme in this data. A majority of families did not engage in the educational marketplace until the middle or high school levels. Analysis of their decisions and the influential factors shared in their choices suggests that participation in the educational marketplace required the convergence of several assets not often present in individual Latinx families' lived experiences. Most ostensibly, parents had to activate two valuable forms of their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005): aspirational capital as the motivation to seek alternatives to their TPS, and navigational capital as the knowledge that alternatives exist. Though market theory assumes the individual consumer enters the marketplace as a rational actor poised to take advantage of the variety of schooling options available, data from this study often revealed contradictory experiences for these Latinx families. As members of a culture whose values emphasize *educación, respeto,* and *familismo*, and as immigrants with varying educational and socioeconomic backgrounds themselves, Latinx respondents approached the marketplace from a different perspective than normative expectations of market theory. Consequently, they engaged in school choice much later and in a limited capacity than the normative consumer. This section will detail their approach, highlighting characteristics unique to this population. Figure 1 provides a visual diagram of the organization of part one of this chapter's thematic findings.

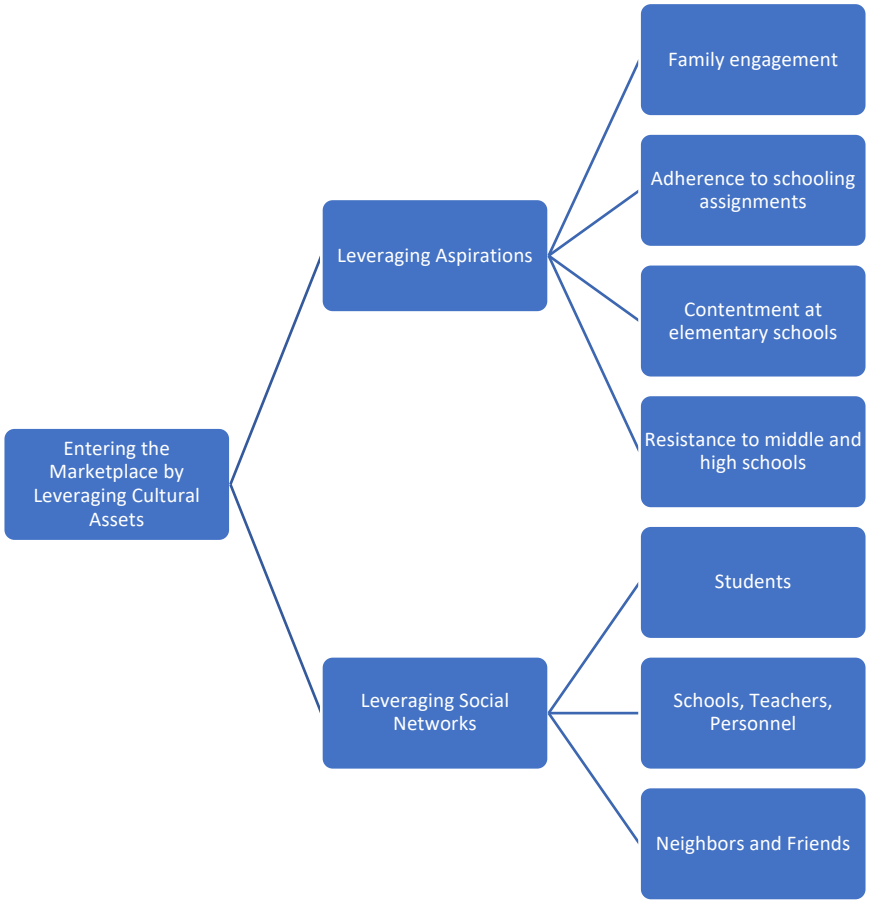

Figure 1: Thematic findings presented in chapter four: Part one

Leveraging Aspirations

The resilient and opportunistic attitudes of Latinx parents emerged throughout discussions of schooling decisions and education-related experiences. In various ways families engaged in their children's education, both in traditional practices easily recognizable to school personnel and in cultural practices more visible to their particular community. Initially trusting the institution to provide such valued educational opportunity, families began to seek alternative paths to improved academic options as they neared transitions into middle and high schools, as will be further explained. During this time, Latinxs' aspirational capital, or persistent hope in the possibility of their

children's future (Yosso, 2005), served as motivation to engage in the marketplace in various capacities and for various reasons. In the following sections I will present important aspects of this process.

Family engagement. Many of the participants in this study were individually very active in their child's education, with evidence of traditional parent involvement practices surfacing during interviews. They made references to serving on the PTA board, meeting with teachers, attending family events, advocating for their children with administrators, and helping with projects at home, all of which reflected a high level of interaction with schools, particularly at the elementary level. Despite their own lack of educational opportunities in their native country, parents encouraged their children to read and apply themselves to their studies in both English and Spanish, sometimes sharing texts or trying to read in both languages. Lucas, who attended schools in El Salvador through the secondary level, had a book in Spanish from his own elementary years, which he shared with his oldest child: "I tell him, read, read! He's 10 years old, and I want the example for the other [children]. With the same book I am reading to the little one who is five." Parents communicated a strong value of education with the belief that it can lead to better employment and an improved quality of life. For example, Andrés, who came from a rural area in Mexico with little educational opportunity, explained that on Saturdays his son wanted to go with him to his work at a construction site. He shared, "There I tell him, 'What do you see here? For that reason you have to study.'" With such ties to upward mobility, an immigrant mentality was also reflected in the thoughts of Antonio, who came to the United States from Honduras:

> When she [my daughter] went to school…I would say, "You can do what you want, move forward, because the success you achieve is dependent on how much effort you put into it."…That, for us, the parents, fills us with pride because we know that tomorrow…our children will be ahead of where we were on our former academic path for the betterment of themselves and they will be able to defend themselves with a profession. That is peace of mind for us, the parents.

Parents' high aspirations for their children's academic attainment were explicit and reinforced the importance of education, and, more broadly, learning for the future. Mariana, wife of Andrés and a Salvadoran mother of three, shared this example of the way she has supported her oldest son, eleven-year-old Nico:

> I ask what they want to do, when they are studying. Well, Nico tells me, he's always said he wants to be a mechanic…We've seen that yes he can be one, because look, he does it when he gets home—he makes a mess because he wants to be hammering, he wants to be taking out screws, he'll dismantle something to put it back together again. I have bought him tons of keys—he'll tell me, "Buy these keys," and I buy them for him. He's lost a lot of them and I keep buying them for him.

For a child who often "doesn't want to read," his mother's support of his areas of interest helps keep him engaged in his learning and provides a boost in his confidence.

Beyond academics, aspirations, and traditional parent involvement activities, the Latinx values of *educación* and *respeto* were evident in their parenting practices, as an emphasis on good moral behavior echoed throughout accounts of their children's schooling experiences. Isabel explained an important part of their daily routine getting

ready for school: “When they leave in the mornings from here [I tell them], ‘I love you, behave, do your work, work hard above all,’ and you always have to teach them respect.” Similarly, Maria explained her beliefs about the importance of instilling respect from an early age:

> I feel that I am the first teacher of my daughters. I feel that the teachers at the school have a [super] big job, and I do, too, as a parent. Some parents think that the teacher has to teach everything…I teach them a little from school, not much, because it's different from how I learned. But how to have values, to follow the rules, to listen, all of that, to respect [others]…I tell my daughters, if you follow the rules, you won't have any problems. Respect everyone. I believe the education begins at home.

These values and expectations for their own children were often mirrored in their perception of an ideal school and their desire for a positive learning environment in which their children could grow as good students and as good people. However, despite these multiple and varied forms of family engagement, particularly their consistently high aspirational values, participation in the educational marketplace—in seeking a school beyond their TPS best matched to their child’s needs and interests—did not occur until children approached the middle or high school level. Additional data sheds insight into concurrent factors affecting their ability to leverage such aspirational capital towards entering the marketplace.

Adherence to schooling assignments prior to Kindergarten. Participants’ initial entry into schools at the elementary level were primarily led by a routine procedure of enrollment and adherence to their assigned TPS. For example, Camila explained the

process she had followed quite simply: “It seemed that when one enrolled, they give you a paper, you don't have an option.” Similarly, another mother, Rosa, described the process as one without much autonomy: “I went where they told me so no, I didn’t even check if there were other options for me or asked anything. Simply where they told me, I sent them [my children].” Even families whose children attended PreK programs at elementary schools in the district were not provided the necessary information to apply to schools beyond their TPS. Instead, the three families who attempted to pursue alternatives, all in search of bilingual programs for their children, had to put forth the initiative themselves. Valentina was successful, in part because her oldest daughter was entering at second grade and had previously been enrolled in a bilingual school in New York. She explained, “When we arrived here I told her [the employee] I wanted a bilingual school because she [my daughter] came from a bilingual school over there.” Several years later, this experience is what enabled her to enroll her younger twin boys in a magnet language program at the Kindergarten level. Two other families were late to pursuing bilingual options, having learned of the options when their children were in first and third grades, respectively; after their children took the required entrance exams, it was determined they did not meet the language proficiency requirements (including speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in their native language, Spanish, to qualify for enrollment.

Contentment at elementary school. Because many families were content at their elementary schools, there was often no impetus to pursue alternatives. When asked to describe their experience at their neighborhood elementary school, families often responded positively and sincerely, as Camila did: “I am delighted with this school. The

teachers, everything, everything, everything." Similarly, Romina raved, "Everything. I like everything. Communication, everything." Most families described high levels of involvement at the elementary level, meeting with teachers, volunteering when possible, and attending family events. These positive interactions were reflected in their review of the school. For example, Valentina's appreciation for the school's outreach was evident in her response: "I am very happy because they have helped so much with the kids." Teachers were the source of accolades for Isabel, as she told me, "I can't say a bad thing about any of the teachers because they were great. Everyone at Moore was great. I can't say a bad thing about them."

Attending schools in which Latinxs comprised a significant percentage of its population proved advantageous from a communication standpoint; as Elena reflected, "We don't have any difficulty with the language. They have translators so that makes it very easy to communicate with them." The positive school culture, learning environment, and relationships with staff left most families with overall satisfaction with their school. Interestingly, performance data of these three elementary schools might suggest an alternate evaluation by consumers. As listed in Table 8, all three received a report card grade of C (average) or below. The high percentages of families from low-income households qualified all three as Title I schools, which frequently carries a stigma in the educational marketplace. Participants in this study were either not aware of these indicators or dismissed them because of their positive perceptions of other aspects of the school.

Table 8: Traditional public elementary school demographic and performance data

TP Elementary School	*Hispanic*	*Students of Color*	*Low SES*	*Report Card Grade*	*Growth Status*
Cypress Elementary	84%	97%	93%	D	Exceeded
Moore Elementary	49%	89%	81%	C	Exceeded
Hillside Elementary	56%	98%	98%	D	Exceeded

Resistance to TP middle and high schools. As families faced the transition of sending their children to middle or high school, parents began to learn more about their child's future TPS and were motivated to seek alternatives. Fears of the potentially negative influence of schooling experiences on their children during this difficult period of adolescence weighed heavily on parents' minds, especially amidst the rumors and reputation held by the neighborhood middle schools. Sofía explained: "Well, okay, one is a mother—me of two [in school] and her [neighbor] of three. My son is going into sixth, a higher level, a little older, more independent, you see. That is scary." Anxieties were particularly high among families from Cypress and Moore Elementary schools, which fed into Browne Middle School. Expressing a distinct trepidation for the presence of drugs in the middle school, Isabel shared worries of raising children during this particular time period in children's lives, especially considering what they would be exposed to in schools:

> But it's hard with the schools...Because that's where they start to change, they're good kids. They leave elementary school being good children. But the atmosphere that is in the school, and the bad people who sell drugs go to and put themselves in schools. They send other children, pay them to go and get more kids addicted.

Already concerned with their children's transition from childhood to early adolescence, parents' anxieties intensified with the prospective presence of such negative influences, fueled by stories of lived experiences of children who had previously attended these schools.

Some parents' fears stemmed directly from personal experiences of older children who had previously attended or were currently attending the middle school. They shared numerous accounts of encounters related to bullying, violence, drugs, and unsupportive teachers. Camila described the painful realities of middle school life for her oldest son, who had already spent two years at their TPS:

> …Every day there was a problem. [He'd say,] "I don't want to go, leave me alone," and he was afraid to go on the bus almost every day, or my sister brought him to me in the afternoon because he didn't want to go on the bus. He was afraid.

Isabel's two oldest children had also come home with reports of the negative learning environment that existed in the school, including poor relationships between teachers and students. Yazmin, her oldest daughter, recalled: "One teacher had told me that he didn't care if they wanted to study or not, that he was still getting paid. That if they wanted to study they could, if not, it wasn't his problem." As younger siblings faced the transition into middle school, parents aspired to offer them a better educational opportunity.

Families whose oldest child was entering middle school often heard similar stories of negative experiences circulating among neighbors and friends in the area, which likewise left parents worried about the physical and mental safety of their children. Perla explained,

> As a mother you talk and one day a mother was saying negative things about Browne; there's a lot of racism, I heard a kid has taken his own life. They're things that affect you being a parent. You've already gone through life—I'm a woman of 38 years—but you're worried for your child, who's a very impressionable mind.

The shared experiences of others were sometimes reinforced by events witnessed by parents living in the area. Natalia was one who expressed concern for the detrimental influence of certain adolescents rumored to be attending the school:

> We've heard it's not a good school with good students. You'll see kids in Browne not getting on the bus and just walking at the Metro or walking just around. Kids do it themselves, obviously, putting themselves in bad situations, but you don't want your kid around that. And also I've heard about the kid who…hung himself. So that as well. We've heard there's a lot of drugs, too.

Numerous and repeated reports of the unfavorable learning environment at TP middle and high schools were most frequently cited as motivation to seek alternative educational opportunities, particularly among families in the Moore and Cypress Elementary Schools feeding into Browne Middle. Desire for more challenging academic programs, including bilingual education, also turned families away from their TPS and towards other options. Families from Hillside Elementary mentioned fewer concerns about the safety and climate at their TP middle school, yet they often acknowledged the higher levels of learning they thought they could find elsewhere. Table 9 summarizes the motivating factors shared by participants for engaging in school choice.

Table 9: Motivating factors to seek an alternative school to TPS

Reason	*Participant*
Avoid traditional public school	Isabel, Camila, Rosa, Marta, Carla, Natalia, Elena, Perla, Sofía
Better academics	Daniela, Romina, Julia, Maria, Alejandra
Bilingual education	Valentina, Lucas

Demographic and performance data for the TPS at the middle school level for families in this study are provided in Table 10. Not unlike their feeder elementary schools, these two schools are highly segregated by race/ethnicity and also contain high concentrations of students of poverty, qualifying both for Title I status. The school report card grade, determined primarily by students' proficiency on state end-of-course examinations, indicate low academic performance, though Browne Middle met its expected growth for the year. Because these two schools have reported consistently low academic achievement over the last three years, the district has granted their students "School Performance Priority," allowing them "the opportunity to apply to enroll in a higher-performing home school or to a magnet school with priority status." Interestingly, while parents zoned for Browne Middle expressed numerous fears for a safe learning environment, school report card data indicates that a school safety rating of 0.55 (the number of criminal acts reported per 100 students), which is below the district average of 0.97. At Delano Middle, however, where parents were less concerned about this aspect, the school safety rating was 2.85, well above the district average.

Table 10: Traditional public middle school demographic and performance data

TP Middle School	*Hispanic*	*Students of Color*	*Low SES*	*Report Card Grade*	*Growth Status*
Browne Middle	39%	90%	77%	D	Met
Delano Middle	48%	96%	94%	F	Not Met

Source: Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, NC School Report Cards

As parents were asked to describe their ideal school and characteristics most important to them, a similar combination of desires for "seguridad" (safety) and "enseñanza" (teaching) permeated their responses, reinforcing the sentiments expressed as motivations for pursuing schooling options beyond their TPS. As seen in Table 11, which contains several of the comments made by participants, parents' previously mentioned fears of bullying, gangs, violence, drugs, and unsupportive teachers were reflected in conceptions of what they wanted—the pervasive theme of safety, structure, and a positive learning environment. Families' aspirational capital, seeking educational opportunities for children's advancement, echoed in their statements, as well as a high regard for family engagement. Parents' perceptions of an ideal seemed to be formed by previous experiences of schools, perhaps limited by their own exposure to understanding what is available in the United States.

Table 11: Participants' conceptions of an ideal school

Participant	*Description*
Perla	Like all mothers, we want the best. Like she [friend] said, in the area where we are, there's too much going on among the young kids. A school more rigid, more observant [is what's ideal], that's my opinion.
Valentina	I want a school where they learn, where they get ahead, that they won't stay, like us. I want them to adapt and languages interest me because I see that there are many people that speak many different languages.
Maria	An ideal school…has classes, more opportunities. There are schools that offer more classes, after school programs...there was a program for mothers to train them to help with reading, math in the rooms. The moms directly helped the lowest kids. I liked it also because my daughter also was happy her mom was coming.
Elena	So safety is first. And then the fact that they're learning, and transportation because in our case we don't drive… I'd like a school that teaches *everything* they need. Languages that they want to learn, how to dance…helps them play the guitar or other instruments, gives them the education they deserve, anything that they're interested in and nurtures them.

Individual aspirations of educational opportunities and motivations of ideal schools were only one factor contributing to families' engagement in school choice. In order to participate in the marketplace, families had to concurrently leverage this aspirational capital with knowledge of the alternatives and the associated application process. For this navigational capital, families often utilized connections beyond their individual capacity, as will be described in the next section.

Leveraging Social Networks

Because the system of school choice was one with which many of these immigrant parents were unfamiliar, having attended schools in their respective native countries outside North Carolina and the United States, parents relied heavily on external sources of information to learn of and navigate schooling options. Interview revealed that entry into the marketplace was rarely an independent endeavor, and few participants were successful initiating participation on their own. Rather, parents were very receptive and appreciative of the insight shared by friends, neighbors, teachers, and even their own children, in helping them seek the best educational opportunity available. Because access and use of technology was often limited, and transportation and language were frequent impediments, parents rarely made decisions solely based on their own research or based on visits to schools. Table 12 shows the sources of information families used to make schooling decisions, illuminating trends in the importance of social and familial ties for gaining knowledge of their educational options. The following sections will elaborate upon these channels through which parents were informed of the school choice process.

Table 12: Sources of information used to make school choice decision

Family	*Own Research*	*Visit*	*Older Sibling*	*Extended Family*	*Student*	*Neighbor*	*Teacher/ Staff*	*None*
Rivera	X		X				X	
Jimenez				X	X	X		
Guerrero	X				X	X	X	
Rodriguez	X	X	X			X		
Vasquez								X
Ramirez		X		X	X	X	X	
Izaguirre	X					X		
Sanchez	X			X		X	X	
Escobar		X			X	X	X	
Santos					X	X	X	
Martinez					X			
Ramos	X	X		X				
Hernandez					X		X	
Lopez					X	X	X	
Morales					X	X	X	
Gonzalez						X	X	
Castillo						X	X	

Students. As students faced the prospect of attending a new school, fifth graders and eighth graders alike assumed leadership roles in acquiring the knowledge of their educational options. Their daily presence in schools and opened them to informational channels through teachers and peers that helped form conceptions of the TPS to which they were assigned the following year, and these sources also helped them become aware of alternatives. Children then took ownership of the decision and advised their parents, who were often less knowledgeable of the schools and choice system. This was the case in the Hernandez family, as Carla credited her son for initiating their search for a different middle school:

> I wasn't interested in changing the school, but because my child…he recommended that we try a different school. It was an easy process because they send the papers, but now that he's older, it's easier too because he can actually

> contribute something that he's saying. When he was younger it was more difficult because we had to go to the school [for help], but now it's mostly based on his commentary, what he hears.

Parents often recognized that their children had access to information they may not—advice from teachers, experiences of peers, reviews in English as they navigated through technology—and they welcomed and respected their input. Elena shared,

> …the 11-year-old knows the most. The 11-year-old will get on the internet and tell me about the best things about the specific schools and be like, "Mom, this one's good because…and this one's good because of this."

Particularly by high school, students had become more familiar of the magnet school options and lottery application and often took the lead in navigating the process on their own. In one instance, Alejandra Martinez said she couldn't provide many details of their decision because it had been done entirely by her son without her knowing: "He did it on his own, he did the application. Then he told me that he had applied. I believe that he applied for two, one that is on [road name] and the one that he got." In other instances, parents recognized their secondary role and allowed the children's initiative to guide further collection of information about schools. Daniela offered details about this process in their family:

> My daughter had informed herself and it was a very good school and we liked it, because we had become informed that it was well advanced…I didn't have much information but my daughter yes she had been informed enough…she is always helping me a lot, she is well involved, finding about the schools and everything, and the same to help her nephews for the best where they can go.

In over half of the instances in which students were leading their decisions, parents also referenced their children performing well academically and/or getting good grades. As will be further explained in the next section, it is possible this student characteristic served as an advantage in gaining and utilizing information related to school choice.

Schools, teachers, and personnel. For many families, schools themselves served as invaluable sources of social and navigational capital that permitted their engagement in the educational marketplace. Students who excelled in class were often encouraged by their teachers to pursue alternatives, such as magnets, for their next school. Parents either received this advice secondhand from their children, as Carla acknowledged, "I think they're helping him know which ones are the better ones," or directly from teachers during conferences or meetings. Romina explained this powerful influence as she described their decision for her son's middle school:

> I never thought about it until maybe high school but I talk [sic] to his teacher and she say [sic]—because I thought that it was better because they go like, they're bigger, and I thought there were more problems than the lower schools, so I was going to wait until high school—but his teacher told me, "Talk to [school employee] and I think you have to apply to magnet schools."

She later continued her account:

> First I talk [sic] with his teachers, yeah she told me that Delano [TPS] was a good school but there was just going to be like fight peoples around and they wouldn't have the same capacity…but at the magnet school he's going to have bigger group and then he's going to be working harder.

This teacher's input pushed Romina to submit an application for her son to attend a magnet school with an academically robust International Baccalaureate program. On their own, none of the families interviewed were knowledgeable about neither the state voucher program for private schools or charter schools in the area. The Rivera family, however, frantically seeking alternatives to their TPS when the magnet school lottery didn't work in their favor, was informed of a charter middle school by a staff member of the TP elementary school. Yazmin explained, "Then Ms. — told us about the school they attend now. She lives around there. She was the one that told us about that school." Without her trusted referral, Yazmin and her mother recognized that they would not have known about charters and would have been left without any options except for the TPS to which they were assigned.

After becoming aware of magnet schools as alternatives to their TPS—either through their children, neighbors, or teachers—many families relied on the guidance offered by schools to complete the application. Parents often needed the support both in knowing which schools to select as well as in using the computers to submit the electronic form. Without access or frequent use of computers at home, the technology added another layer of complexity. Families at two of the three elementary schools had a direct connection to school personnel through a Communities in Schools (CIS) representative, a person who was highly respected in the community and known as an essential resource. As Julia described this person, she said, "Everyone is this neighborhood talks to Ms. –. For whatever problem, you ask Ms. –." At Cypress Elementary, Sofía expressed the invaluable role of the CIS representative:

> She is a really great person. She helps with so much and even with picking out clothes for the kids, helping them figure out what school supplies the need, helping get deals for book bags and all that, simple stuff. We go to her for everything—one call and she'll help you with anything.

These two school personnel often worked one-on-one with families to help them apply for magnet schools. Romina ultimately credited her school selection to this person, as she said, "…What I know from Ms. – that she told me that this school is better for him." After seeking support at the school and local family support center, Perla and Sofía recalled this Communities in Schools representative as the one who helped them get the application submitted. "She walked us through it and really helped us figure out what they were doing with the lottery," recalled Sofía. This direct guidance from a knowledgeable, trusted figure at the school was greatly appreciated by several participants.

Cypress Elementary School offered a session the night of a student musical performance to make computers and information available to families before the end of the first round of the magnet school lottery. Fifth grade teachers, who knew the students well, along with the school counselor and Communities in Schools representative, were present to offer guidance to families as they completed the application. Carla commented, "I think it was easy. I brought the paper that I had received before. I brought the paper to the school and said I wanted to do the lottery." Similarly, Natalia recalled the support received at this event: "I went up and I asked which ones are the best ones and then they told me." A similar event had been hosted at Moore Elementary several years ago, Rosa recalled, at which the guidance counselor and staff helped her complete the application,

which ultimately got her oldest son and subsequent children into the magnet system. Though not heavily attended by Latinx parents, these events proved valuable to those who did.

A few other families sought guidance and support from the district's Family Center, a year-round resource for student enrollment. Along with bilingual staff, the Center has computers available for families' use to complete enrollment applications for PreK, TPSs, and magnet schools (during the open lottery time periods). Families reported mixed experiences receiving assistance there. Camila for one, was very grateful for the help she received, particularly because she found the technology—having to use the computer for the application—very intimidating: "Yes, a very nice woman explained to me how, and I followed along with a friend who had Internet, a computer, and that was it [how I applied]." Aware of an information session being held by staff at the Center, I brought Mariana and her children to learn about the magnet programs and to receive assistance completing the application because they did not have a computer or Internet access at home. As the only family in attendance, they had several staff members and a translator who sat down with her to explain the lottery process, the schools, their themes, and their locations, and to enter their selections into the online application. Though she admitted to being a bit overwhelmed at times by the amount of information and people being directed towards her, Mariana left content that the application was done and that she had learned of additional resources for her youngest son, who was eligible to apply for PreK programs.

These experiences and information obtained often became a part of the collective knowledge shared by friends and neighbors in their social networks. Thus, some

benefitted secondhand from the support provided at the Family Center, as Elena credited her school selection to knowledge obtained from a friend who went to the Center: “They [friends] went to the Center because she doesn't have Internet access, that the lady was saying that [magnet school] was better. They told her which ones [to select].” Not all visits, however, were fruitful or positive, as Natalia recalled her own experience:

> There were two people in front of me. The lady who was at the front desk was saying, “I can't help you fill this out so fill it out yourself.” But she didn’t know how to use a computer. She didn’t have access to a computer at home and so she was here…She's telling her, “I need your help,” and the lady wasn't helping them.

For the Rivera family, the experience was also far from pleasant:

> We went to the application center and the one that was there was getting the nail polish off her nails. She didn't even look at us…She is Colombian, they are very rude. They are very racist towards Hispanics. They act like if they are American. Americans aren't always rude, most aren't. But the Colombians are very rude with us. They are disrespectful. When I was talking to her she was removing the nail polish off her nails…She didn't even look up at us…No, and she acted like if she didn't care that I was trying to talk to her. She made another lady cry, because the other lady didn't know how to read or write, and she was asking the Colombian for help with the information. For me, I only speak a little English, she [oldest daughter] speaks English, but that other lady didn't speak it at all. I don't know what she said to her but that lady left crying, I don't know what happened to her but I did get mad.

These accounts shed light into the complexities facing Latinxs as they seek guidance and support, and the vulnerable position in which they often find themselves, relying on others for necessary information. Notably, only families from Moore and Cypress feeder patterns, which were within a couple miles of the Center, reported visits; families from Hillside, who resided in an area of the city approximately 10 miles away from the Center, made no mention of this support.

Even after the application process, schools served as instrumental resource for making their admission requests to magnet schools a reality. For Julia, a teacher took direct involvement to ensure her daughter was accepted. She explained what happened with her middle daughter:

> She applied for a magnet in the first lottery and she was not accepted. And so a teacher at [the school] heard and looking at her grades said this cannot happen, it's not right…the teachers had told her that for sure they will go easily, all of them, the six [highest performers] and so the teacher called, said perhaps there was an error, and the following week, they received their paper that they were accepted.

It was also through the elementary school that parents expanded their social networks, forming relationships with other parents with children enrolled there. For Rosa, these connections proved essential to her decision to apply to a magnet, as another mother became her ally in helping with logistical barriers, such as transportation. She recalled,

> We were together, we said, “We’re going to do it like that.” Because we were both new, we didn’t know how to do it, and so we said, “We’re going to join together.” The school gets assigned to us and we’ll go and we’ll bring them and take them home s that they can go to the other school.

Having the social connections, information channels, and additional resources from their experiences of children attending elementary schools helped enable parents to pursue additional educational opportunities for their children.

Neighbors and friends. As previously described, a frequently cited source of information about schools were neighbors and friends living nearby. Because many families had immigrated to the country and were without extended family, participants shared how neighbors assumed close kinship ties and served as an invaluable role in various capacities of their lives. Additional language barriers in participants' proficiency of English also prompted a need for shared knowledge of navigating institutions such as schools. Few parents reported visiting schools, partly due to logistics of managing family at the time of day when open houses were scheduled and partly due to restrictions of transportation. Many avoided driving or were unfamiliar with other parts of the county. Instead, parents trusted the knowledge and experiences of those in their community. This emphasis resonates with a simple yet powerful statement made by Isabel: "Hispanics listen. Hispanics don't visit schools to go and see what they look like. But we do listen." As previously described in detail, the shared experiences of others shaped reputations of schools, either positive in their contentment with certain schools or negative in their dissatisfaction with others. Neighbors helped the Ramirez family form their initial perception of their TPS and confirmed an approval of the elementary school, as Daniela recounted,

> We were in the community where we live in the apartments, [and] they told us. We started to find out if we would like the school, and yes, many friends, many friends had children here and we liked the school very much.

On the flipside, Isabel recognized the powerful influence of others' commentary on their TP middle school: "If I'm listening to all those things about Browne Middle, how was I going to send [my daughter] there? How can I send [my daughter] there? No, no, [I can't]." For some families, this social commentary provided the push to then inquire about alternatives, often leading them to public magnet schools, the other sector of the educational marketplace most familiar to those in their social networks.

A few families used the knowledge acquired by friends or neighbors to then investigate further with additional research of their own. Rosa described their decision to apply to a magnet school as being a process of corroboration across various sources of information and considerations:

> Everything worked out because online it said that it…was magnet, that it was a good school, and no one had heard [anything bad], and we lived close. And so whatever we took into account we had already heard from neighbors or friends that had gone to that school. We also had acquaintances that had gone there. So, you always talk about it if there are problems at school, it is the first thing you talk about, the parents, that there are problems in the school or something. So we didn't have any bad experience with that school, that influenced everything, the internet, of course, it verified what we found on the internet.

The experience of a neighbor is also what prompted Romina to pursue additional information and resources before applying to the magnet school lottery:

> My neighbor, her daughter goes to Brookmeade for magnet school. And I see that…it's hard because you have to do a lot of work. And I see on the internet and I check what level they have [sic] and they have a good one. And so I talk to Ms.

> – which one she think is better for him, and she said there are all those schools but maybe for him she says these are the best—we can choose three options. So we put Brookmeade first. I can't remember the other two.

Though many families did not have computers and the Internet at home to complete the application, just over a third of families mentioned using some form of school ratings obtained from websites, often through their smartphones, as a source of information about schools. Two families specifically referenced the "number of stars" a school received as influencing their perception of a school. Similarly, Camila mentioned knowing the number of stars for a school, but she and her daughter obtained this rating through a housing app that linked available apartments with its assigned TPS. With the increasing number and types of schools available, the Internet provides copious amounts of school data through state and district sources, including the North Carolina School Report Cards, as well as proliferating websites such as greatschools.org, schooldigger.com, carolinaschoolhub.com, and additional blogs available for personal commentary. Yet beyond one reference to school report cards, none of these sources were utilized by participating families.

Summary

In the first part of this chapter, I examined the processes, factors, and influences leading to Latinx families' exposure to school choice. Contrary to the assumption that parents are "rational actors" prepared to make schooling decisions for their children, these Latinx families needed the elementary school years to leverage individual and cultural assets to permit their participation as consumers in the educational marketplace. Though parents evidenced multiple and various forms of engagement with schools and

their child's education, such aspirational capital became a more valuable asset as they neared the middle and high school level, when families were more motivated to seek alternatives to their TPS. Simultaneously, parents' knowledge of the choice system increased through collaboration with those in their social and familial networks, as their children, teachers, neighbors, and friends provided valuable support for navigating their schooling options. *Now* prepared to engage in the marketplace, the families' lived experiences of selecting a middle and/or high school are the focus of the second half of this chapter. Breaking down their participation in each of the sectors, I will reveal the opportunities and limitations faced by families in pursuing these respective schooling options, including parents' perceived impact of the educational opportunities (or lack thereof) afforded to their children.

Part Two: Participating in the Marketplace Amidst Societal Constraints

A second pattern emerging from the data was how Latinx families were engaged in the educational marketplace—which sectors, what facilitated their participation, what hindered their participation—and the outcomes of their schooling decisions. Analysis of these processes and decisions described by participants, triangulated with additional data, suggests that despite their accumulation and leveraging of cultural assets (described in the previous section), Latinxs experienced numerous barriers that immediately limited their choice sets. A majority of families (12 out of 17) participated through the magnet lottery, with nine out of 15 families gaining admission into a magnet for either middle or high school. As previously described, one family, dissatisfied with magnet lottery results, was informed of charter schools and had the resources to pursue that option. One family had no knowledge of any alternatives, two had knowledge but missed deadlines and/or failed

to meet requirements, and two who were previously participating through the magnet lottery chose not to this year because of assignment changes through revisions to the school assignment plan (improved TPS assignment). Refer back to Tables 5, 6, and 7 for details of the of schooling decisions for all children of participating families in each of the three feeder patterns.

Though market theory asserts that an expanded marketplace will foster increased competition leading to improved educational opportunity, data from this study again revealed contradictory experiences for many of these Latinx families. While most families engaged in school choice by the middle or high school level, they were primarily engaged in only one sector of the marketplace. Furthermore, even that participation did not guarantee changes in their schooling options. The rest of this chapter will describe Latinx families' experiences in each sector of the marketplace, highlighting the ways in which community cultural wealth was confronted or countered by structural constraints of the marketplace. Figure 2 provides a visual diagram of the organization of part two of this chapter's thematic findings.

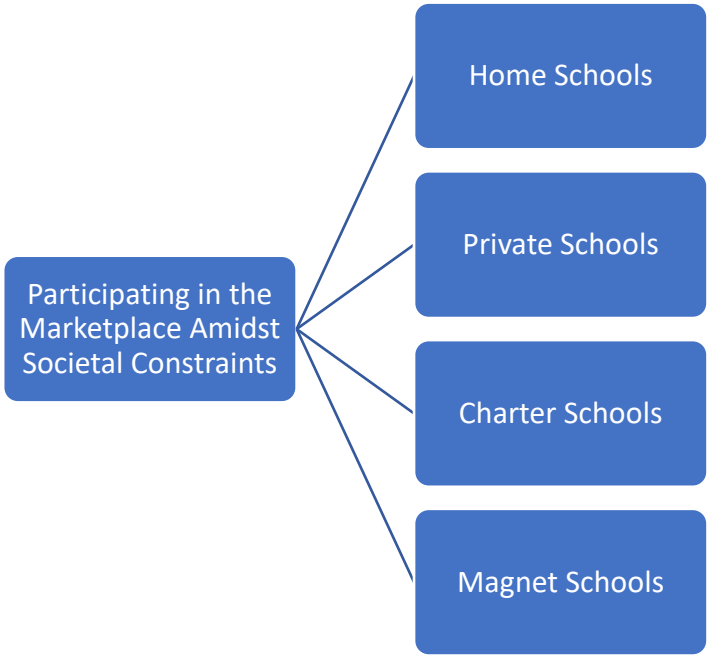

Figure 2: Thematic findings presented in chapter four: Part two

Home Schools

Parent-led home-based education is on the rise in NC and Mecklenburg County (see Table 13). Reports drawn from national data conclude that students enrolled in this form of school are predominantly white and nonpoor (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2016). From a more local standpoint, Hui (2014) suggests that a number of current issues in public education are contributing to the increase in home schooling, among them being anxieties related to school violence, the pressures of high-stakes testing, and new pedagogies related to the Common Core State Standards.

Table 13: Home school enrollment in North Carolina and Mecklenburg County

Year	*Number of Schools*		*Estimated Enrollment*	
	North Carolina	*Mecklenburg*	*North Carolina*	*Mecklenburg*
2014 - 2015	67,804	5,101	106,853	7,741
2015 - 2016	74,653	5,607	118,268	8,773
2016 - 2017	80,973	5,926	127,847	9,396

Source: North Carolina Home School Statistical Summary (Department of Administration)

Though many participating families expressed grave concerns of school violence in the form of bullying, gangs, theft, and other physical harm, none mentioned home schooling as a potential option for their children's education. As immigrants to the country, navigating the requirements for establishing a home school and enrolling in this form of alternative schooling is likely a process of which they have little knowledge. Because nearly all families were non-fluent in English, the language barrier certainly serves as an impediment to this sector of the marketplace. Furthermore, several families referenced their own limited educational experiences in their home country, often due to financial hardships of their family, which prevents them from utilizing this educational option. While home schooling is increasingly an option that advantage many families in Mecklenburg County and across the nation, even the pooling of collective cultural assets does not help Latinx families engage in this educational option.

Private Schools

In North Carolina, the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) was initiated in the 2014-2015 school year and provides up to $4,200 per year for eligible children in grades K-12 who choose to attend a participating nonpublic school. Family income cannot exceed a cap set by the state, which follows criteria of the federal free and reduced-price lunch program (NCSEAA, n.d.). Table 14 shows the rapidly rising popularity in this sector of the educational marketplace, including the strong legislative support allocating additional funding to the initiative.

Table 14: Enrollment and funding in North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program

Year	*Total New Applicants*	*Recipients*	*From Mecklenburg*	*Money Allocated*
2014-2015	5,558	1,216	11.60%	4,635,320
2015-2016	8,675	3,682	8.70%	13,149,842
2016-2017	9,395	5,624	8.50%	21,760,837
2017-2018	10,578	7,243	11.30%	20,287,786

Source: North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority

A recent analysis by Egalite, Porter, and Stallings (2017) reveals patterns in the characteristics of applicants to the OSP, noting that a majority of voucher recipients (67%) are enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade, which is disproportionately higher than the number of students enrolled in public elementary schools (47%) in the state during the 2015-2016 school year. Furthermore, disparities seem to exist by participation of ethnic groups, with Latinxs (9%) underrepresented in comparison to their constitution of enrollment in the state (17 %), and more likely to be Black (36 percent versus 26 percent). As noted by researchers, important to consider in these comparisons is the eligibility of participants:

> The ideal comparison group would be the population of voucher-eligible non-recipients who meet the requirements for family income, prior public school attendance, or other entry pathways such as qualifying because a child is in foster care, has been adopted, or has a parent on active military duty.

Trends in the rates of participation of families by ethnicity for the four years of OSP's existence are displayed in Table 15. While White families increasingly constitute a large percentage of scholarship recipients, Blacks' participation are declining, and Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, and people of Other ethnicities remain, for the most part,

consistent. These trends do not seem to reflect the demographic changes in the state, however, such as the notable surges in Hispanic and Asian populations.

Table 15: Enrollment in North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program by ethnicity

Year	*American Indian*	*Asian*	*Black*	*Hispanic*	*Other*	*White*
2014-2015	1%	2%	51%	9%	10%	27%
2015-2016	1%	2%	38%	8%	13%	39%
2016-2017	1%	1%	35%	10%	12%	41%
2017-2018	1%	2%	32%	9%	13%	44%

Source: North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority

Of the families participating in this study, only one mentioned consideration of private schools. Though she aspired to offer her child a better educational opportunity, Marta faced significant barriers in her pursuit of this option:

> One time I went to an Internet site because I—Miguel has good grades. And so I said, if I can give him something better, here that I have a few more possibilities. And so I searched a school in particular…because when I went to drop off Miguel…I saw the children walking with their uniforms and there it said Ascension Middle School. And so I got there and I looked around, and I said, "What do I have to do so that Miguel could enroll here?" … Well, I searched many things—I called, but they didn't speak Spanish, and so I said, "How can I—?" and I didn't pursue it.

Continuing our conversation, it became evident that another factor was weighing heavily on her mind: the nativity of her son. Having seen on the school's website that scholarships were available, Marta lamented,

> And it says yes they give scholarships, but one has to apply. Sometimes, it also makes me afraid to do it, because Miguel wasn't born here…I don't know if it would be an impediment, but I haven't tried either.

At the countywide school fair, where many private schools had tables, few had materials in Spanish or a translator present. Of the Catholic schools in the area, one was the most prepared and open to support Latinx families, as the principal conveyed their willingness to work with families to offer tuition assistance. Located in East Charlotte, less than three miles from Hillside Elementary, the congregation has a large percentage of Latinx families and offers services in Spanish. However, no participating families in this study living in this part of county mentioned knowledge or interest in this school or sector.

Charter Schools

Following the state's opening of charter schools in the Fall of 1998, and especially its lifting of the 100-school cap in 2011, enrollment in charter schools has risen swiftly across the state. In one year alone, from the school year of 2012-2013 to 2013-2014, an additional 20 charters opened, and enrollment increased by 14% (NCES, 2015). According to data retrieved from the North Carolina Departments of Administration and Public Education, over the last three years, since the cap was lifted, student enrollment in charters has increased by 26% in Mecklenburg County. During the 2016-2017 school year, there were 13,614 students attending charter schools, constituting 7.3% of the local educational marketplace. The increasing presence of charter schools in Mecklenburg County can be seen in some parts of the city on city buses and billboards, and in other parts in yard signs at neighborhood corners pitting open house dates of charters next to those of TPSs. Charter schools were well represented at the countywide school fair, with

a variety of themes/programs ranging from Chinese immersion to academically gifted to health and wellness.

For participants in the study, the most common response to inquiries about charters was “What charters?” As previously mentioned, one family had persistently pursued alternatives to their neighborhood middle school when their magnet school choices had not worked out, and was referred to a charter school by a staff member of their elementary school. For other families, knowledge of charters hadn’t broken through social networks for families to learn about the option from trusted sources who have attended them. Thus, their social capital proves most valuable through relationships with teachers who can inform them of this newer option on the market, which is very different from their home country. Comparing enrollment in public schools across the state of North Carolina in 2015-2016, Hispanics in charters are about half (8.5%) what they are in other public schools (16.5%). Demographic data show that Latinxs are underrepresented in charters in Mecklenburg County as well, with the enrollment percentages for a majority of schools are in the single digits, far below the 23% representation Hispanics assume in the school district. Table 16 provides the racial/ethnic demographic data of Mecklenburg County charters as well as their performance scores gleaned from school report cards.

Table 16: Active charter schools in Mecklenburg County for 2017-2018 school year (with most recent data from 2015-2016)

Charter (pseudonym)	*Letter Grade*	*Perform-ance*	*Achieve-ment*	*Growth*	*Title I*	*% White*	*% Black*	*% Hispanic*	*% Asian/ Other*
Princeton Charter	A+	87	87	84.4	no (0%)	86%	4%	4%	6%
Americus Prep	B	74	73	81.5	no (0%)	81%	3%	9%	7%
Beacon Charter	C	58	52	88.3	no (14%)	80%	4%	6%	10%
Camelot Community	B	78	77	82.6	no	78%	9%	5%	8%
Summit Station Charter	A	85	85	85.7	no (3%)	77%	12%	4%	7%
Emaus Academy	B	81	82	74.2	yes (10%)	76%	6%	8%	10%
Rye Community School	C	67	69	57.5	no	69%	15%	6%	10%
Dare to Dream Academy	C	68	71	59	yes (15%)	66%	22%	8%	4%
Lookout Point Academy	B	73	71	65	no (0%)	61%	23%	8%	8%
Cardinal Charter	C	58	53	78.2	yes	51%	29%	7%	13%
Academy for Gifted Youth	A+	91	95	62.2	no	47%	4%	6%	43%
Archimedean Charter	C	55	50	78.3	yes (42%)	44%	38%	12%	2%
Hope Academy	D	52	46	77.4	no	29%	44%	14%	13%
Turner Collegiate	B	73	72	74.5	no	19%	42%	7%	32%
Montgomery Learning Academy	C	57	49	90.9	no	16%	66%	7%	11%
Cedarwood Charter	F	33	24	67.1	yes	4%	90%	1%	5%
Brentwood Academy	F	29	20	67.6	yes (68%)	4%	83%	8%	5%
Barnes High School	n/a (new)				yes	3%	70%	22%	5%
Lincoln Prep	C	55	48	82.4	yes	2%	93%	4%	1%
Prophets Way Charter	F	14	14		yes	2%	91%	3%	4%
Willow Preparatory	F	37	29	71.6	yes	1%	83%	15%	1%
Selma Academy	C	64	61	78.6	yes (85%)	0%	93%	6%	1%
Hampton Charter	n/a (new)								
Marshall Community	n/a (new)								
Longfellow Charter	n/a (new)								
Hazelton Prep	n/a (new)								
Genesis Charter	n/a (new)								

Source: NCES, 2015-2016; NCDPI, 2015-2016

Beyond the limitation in social capital, Latinxs face numerous other barriers from entry into the charter school sector. Though the Internet offers information about this schooling option, many participating parents reported a lack of familiarity with technology or reliable Internet access at home. Only three charters provided information in Spanish on their websites, and no visible translators were present at the county-wide school fair, suggesting that Latinxs may not be the ideal customer for this sector of the marketplace. Pitched to more normative parents as "a 'private' school education with the tuition-free benefit of a public school" (website, field notes, October 7, 2017), charters seem to be promoting an exclusivity in their membership. Analysis of the location of charters in the county further recognizes those who are benefitting from this option. Comparing the charters available in the zip codes most heavily populated by Whites to those most populated by Hispanics, there is a noticeable difference in populations, income level, and quality (see Tables 17 and 18). Charters in zip codes most populated by Whites mirror their residents, being comprised primarily by Whites with few Hispanics enrolled, and are of higher socioeconomic status, as none qualify as Title I schools. Performance scores are high, with all schools receiving a B or above. In contrast, charters in zip codes most populated by Hispanics are predominantly attended by students of color (primarily Black), all but one have Title I status, and the highest grade received is a C. Schools in these areas are less established, as three do not have data available because they opened within the last two years, and one was recently closed because of unacceptable performance and practices. The one standout charter in this group is Academy for Gifted Youth, which has received an A+, the highest grade on state school report cards. The admissions policy for this school requires that a student must be "highly

intellectually gifted," specifically, that the child's scores "fall at least two standard deviations above the mean on an acceptable IQ test." Consequently, the student population does not mirror its surrounding community, but instead enrolls high percentages of Whites and Asians, and those from more affluent families.

Table 17: Charter schools in zip codes most highly populated by Whites

Zip	*Charter*	*Letter Grade*	*Perform-ance*	*Achieve-ment*	*Growth*	*Title I*	*% White*	*% Black*	*% His-panic*
28207									
28031	Americus Prep	B	74	73	81.5	no (0%)	87%	4%	9%
28277									
28078	Summit Station Charter	A	85	85	85.7	no (3%)	79%	12%	4%
28270									
28036	Princeton Charter	A+	87	87	84.4	no (0%)	89%	5%	4%
28202	Lookout Point Academy	B	73	71	65	no (0%)	65%	24%	9%

Table 18: Charter schools in zip codes most highly populated by Hispanics

Zip	*Charter*	*Letter Grade*	*Perform-ance*	*Achieve-ment*	*Growth*	*Title I*	*% White*	*% Black*	*% His-panic*
28217	Academy for Gifted Youth	A+	91	95	62.2	no	47%	4%	6%
	Hampton Charter	n/a (new)							
28212									
28213	Hope Academy	D	52	46	77.4	no	33%	50%	16%
	Hazelton Prep	n/a (new)							
	Inspire Charter	F				yes			
28273									
28134									
28215	Willow Preparatory	F	37	29	71.6	yes	1%	83%	15%
	Lincoln Prep	C	55	48	82.4	yes	2%	94%	4%
28205	Brentwood Academy	F	29	20	67.6	yes (68%)	4%	83%	8%
	Barnes High School	n/a (new)				yes	3%	70%	22%

Given these exclusionary contexts for Latinxs in Charlotte charters, Isabel felt quite fortunate to have received knowledge of this option. With three of her children at two different charter schools, she was overall very pleased with this alternative to their TPS. Most notably, her comments noted an improved learning environment: "And it's better because the classes are smaller, they pay more attention to the students, and they do not put up with bullying." Having described experiences of bullying and intimidation in their neighborhood school, it was evident this weighed heavily on the family. Isabel and her oldest daughter, Yazmin, who had already graduated from high school, further explained satisfaction with what they observed and knew of the culture and discipline at the charter:

> We liked it a lot that day that we went there. They had a type of assembly and she [principal] told them all, "We are all a family and we all have to behave our best, we have to respect each other to be a good family, a good school." And you can tell that they all...You know that if they don't behave, you are out.

A rigorous curriculum—described by the hours children spent at home completing projects and studying for tests—and caring teachers were also mentioned as benefits of the schools. The positive impact on her youngest sibling's reading achievement was particularly pleasing to Yazmin:

> …they had never given him an award before and they gave him one. And it's like you could see the change because he didn't like to read. I had to tell him, "Hey, do your homework, start reading." I had to sit down with him [and help him do his homework], and now he does his homework by himself, now he even starts reading by himself.

The change in schools was a positive one for this family, yet it didn't come without changes to their home life.

Isabel and Yazmin described other differences between the TPS and charter schools, ones that required more of a sacrifice on the part of their family. In particular, getting the children to and from school was quite an adjustment because transportation was not provided to the charters and they were not located close to the family's home. Having to take traffic into consideration, they drop off the older girls at 7am, an hour before school starts, to then take their younger son to his school. Similarly in the afternoons, they had to allocate ample time to pick up the children:

> For him in the afternoon if we want to make it in time, we have to leave the house around 1:30 or 1:40 to get there around 2:10 or 2:20 PM and wait, because he gets out at 2:45, they get out at 3:00.

Fortunately for the Riveras, they had the resources—an extra car, money for gas, two older siblings with licenses, and free and flexible time away from work requirements—to make these commutes work. There were other financial considerations associated with the school—donations for fundraisers, buying or packing lunches, and fees for extracurricular activities—mentioned by the family. Finally, another adjustment was the language barrier that they now faced attending a school with different demographics. Isabel explained:

> I don't speak Spanish to anyone there. It's just her [Yazmin] who speaks to them, not me. Most of the students there are white. Then come Blacks, after them come Hispanics, and not many Asians.

In many ways the entire family had to be committed to supporting the younger children's improved educational opportunity by attending these charter schools. Ultimately, however, it was their financial stability and available resources that made this even a viable option for them.

Magnet Schools

Originally designed in the 1970s to draw families away from their TPS with their specialized themes in order to promote voluntary integration, magnet schools have held steadily high enrollments/popularity across the nation for decades. Just recently—in the 2014-2015 school year—magnet schools' attendance numbers surpassed by those of charters (NCES, 2016). Locally in CMS, magnet schools have remained an integral part of their student assignment plan, purported to offer unique academic programming and to create more balanced schools racially and socioeconomically. As part of the 2017 revisions to the CMS plan, a weighted lottery system was initiated to give preference to families from low-income households in magnet schools with traditionally higher SES. That same year voters overwhelmingly approved a $922 million bond referendum, in part to improve and expand magnet schools, reflecting strong public support for this sector (Doss Helms, 2017b). For the 2017-2018 school year, the district offered 16 full magnets and 31 partial magnets, with plans to initiate at least 12 more magnet programs the following year. Recently, twenty-one schools were recognized by Magnet Schools of America for their high academics, innovation, and diversity, with eight awarded the top honor as a School of Excellence and 13 as a School of Distinction (CMS, 2018). The accolades helped strengthen public perception of the benefit of these schools.

Of all schooling options, Latinx families in this study were most engaged in this sector of the educational marketplace. Only one family out of the 17 was not aware of the lottery system used to enroll students in these specialized schools. As previously mentioned, families often had multiple sources of information of the availability of this option, either provided by neighbors and friends, teachers or staff, Communities in Schools site coordinators, or the children themselves. Magnet schools were generally perceived as offering higher-quality academic programs, and, importantly, were valued as having safe and structured learning environments to support students' academic and social development. Often the magnet themes of particular schools were unknown or unclear to parents, yet the decision to apply was largely driven by the schools' respected reputations and families' motivations to escape their neighborhood school. For example, in explaining why they listed a particular school as their first choice, Perla did not mention an appeal for its focus on STEM, but rather "because I hear a lot about the kids are more respectful there, there's more order there; I've heard a lot of better things about [it]." Although parents were allowed to select up to six schools on the application, most chose fewer, as they were only familiar with a couple names through their social networks. As Marta explained, after pursuing two bilingual options, she thought she chose the IB magnet, but ultimately, "I chose no more because I said, 'I don't know where it is'." Taken together, these two restrictions of social capital and geographic location greatly affected the decisions, and ultimately outcomes, of students' schooling options.

Thus, along with recommendations from trusted persons, transportation and location were primary considerations in selecting their preferences. Although buses were

offered to transport the children to and from schools within their zone, parents voiced a concern for proximity, as they wanted to be able to get to the school quickly and easily if necessary, particularly if a child were sick or injured. Several parents expressed a desire to volunteer at the school, attend events, meet with teachers, have lunch with their child, or generally to be able to check on their well-being, which thus heightened the importance of the school's geographic location. During Cypress Elementary's magnet school information session, fifth grader Marco sat in front of the computer to fill out the application, listening to the guidance counselor advise him in English on the magnet programs and requirements while his mother, Carla, looked up the location of schooling options on her smart phone (field notes, December 7, 2017). Because many parents did not have a driver's license, transportation was of grave concern, as they either had to rely on public transit or risk being pulled over by the police. Rosa shared a recent experience to explain how the current social climate was contributing to the increased risk driving had become:

> He stopped me, it was at a light, so he was at my side and I turned around. All I did was turn around and he looked at me, and stopped me for being Hispanic. It was funny, he didn't even look at my license plate, he saw me, and once he saw me as if he knew me. I sped up, passed the street light and he followed me and stopped me…He stopped me for the license plate. But my husband just removed it. [He said] "And so tell him bring the temporary one, the one they give you for a month." So I told him—but I still had fifteen more days, I told him: "I don't have it because this is the one they give you for the month." But that is a pretext he used. So when I tell you that he said, "Your license," he knew I didn't have a

> license. He gave me a ticket for no license. But I'm telling you that was because I looked Hispanic, and for that, I shouldn't have a license. It is a pretext because I didn't commit—it was the first time in all the years since I had arrived in Charlotte—When I got my license, I never had—I didn't use it. And now that it's expired, they know… Now it's a bit more, but still—If you go out the last thing you want is issues with the police. You try to do everything you can to follow the rules. You get scared to do something bad and accumulate issues. So you try to go—but the license problem is one you can't fix because they just don't give us licenses. So it's a necessary evil we do, walking around without a license.

After finishing the story, she further reflected on what it's like to drive as a Latinx:

> We need to go around right, we need to drive carefully. Us, yes, but if someone hits me it's the same problem because they hit me but they're still going to ask for my license. Sometimes if we're both Hispanic and we get into an accident sometimes we'll say "Leave it. Leave it alone because the police are going to come, they'll ask me for this and that and we'll have problems," so we just lose always. Now we leave losing. You don't want to hit someone and then they ask, "Take it out, take it out because—." It's like that.

Some families have sought ways to mitigate challenges of transportation. When Julia's oldest daughter applied to a magnet high school several years ago, prior to changes in the district's magnet transportation zones, she explained the dilemma they faced and how they made it work, "I couldn't provide it [transportation] because I don't have a license…my husband said it doesn't matter. We secured a taxi, a lady who did the transportation, for one year to take her to [school]." These examples call attention to the

societal factors, namely the impediment of having a license, that play a part in Latinx families' decisions of where to send their child to school.

As a result of these constraints in social capital and geographic location, families within the same feeder pattern frequently applied to the same two or three schools, though at least 11 options were available to them at the middle school level. Tables 19, 20, and 21 show the distances, considerations, and attendance of participating families by feeder pattern (note: though four to five STEM options were available per feeder, only the closest or one mentioned by families is included). Bilingual schools were popular with families from Moore Elementary, partly because of parents' desire to promote literacy in their children's native language, partly because of the close proximity of two magnet schools with this particular programming, and partly because of the reported success of acquaintances in gaining admission to one of them. This trend in overlapping requests was evident in the strong preference for families coming from Hillside Elementary to seek admission into the IB magnet school, which required that their child meet certain academic requirements. Only one family mentioned interest in attending a magnet school to pursue bilingual education, and this school was located a considerable distance from their house. Though the family mentioned the possibility of moving closer, the child did not pass entrance exams in the fourth grade, and did not know of the new program opening a couple miles down the road from their current residence; they did not participate in the magnet school lottery for the child's upcoming transition into middle school. Families attending Cypress Elementary School showed the most pronounced commonality in their magnet schooling selections, with almost all applying for the same four schools. Although the STEM school was further from their neighborhood, its

positive reputation lured families to listing it first; only one family got in. Interestingly, though bilingual education was of interest to these families, none applied to the language academy located two miles from them. Finally, though each of these families were offered School Performance Priority (SPP) because of the consistently low academic performance of their TPS, no families were admitted into any of these receiving schools; no families from the Hillside feeder pattern mentioned consideration of any of their five SPP options, suggesting a lack of awareness of these schools or the initiative.

Table 19: Distances, considerations, and attendance of middle school options for Moore Elementary feeder pattern

School	*Distance*	*Considered*	*Attended*
TPS	1.8		
Magnet (Spanish)	0.3	Rodriguez, Izaguirre	
Magnet (World Languages)	3.2	Rivera, Guerrero, Rodriguez	Guerrero, Rodriquez
Magnet (Arts)	6.6	Jimenez	
Magnet (Leadership)	6.7		
Magnet (IB)	7.2	Jimenez, Guerrero, Rodriguez	
Magnet (STEM)	8.9	Jimenez	Vasquez*
SPP School A	3.4	Rivera	
SPP School B	6.8	Ramirez	Ramirez
SPP School C	11.3		

**Researcher bias – guided selection*

Table 20: Distances, considerations, and attendance of middle school options for Hillside Elementary feeder pattern

School	*Distance*	*Considered*	*Attended*
TPS	1.8		
Magnet (Leadership)	0.3		
Magnet (Spanish)*	3.2		
Magnet (STEAM)	6.6		
Magnet (IB)	6.7	Sanchez, Escobar	Sanchez
Magnet (Arts)	7.2		
Magnet (World Languages)	8.9	Ramos	
SPP School A	6.4		
SPP School B	6.5		
SPP School C	7.1		
SPP School D	7.6		
SPP School E	10.8		

**new program for 2018-2019*

Table 21: Distances, considerations, and attendance of middle school options for Cypress Elementary feeder pattern

School	*Distance*	*Considered*	*Attended*
TPS	3.6		
Magnet (Spanish)	2.1		
Magnet (World Languages)	2.5	Hernandez, Lopez, Morales	
Magnet (Leadership)	4.8		
Magnet (IB)	6.5	Hernandez	
Magnet (STEM)	7.5	Hernandez, Lopez, Morales, Gonzalez, Castillo	Hernandez
Magnet (Arts)	8.7		
SPP School A	3.3	Lopez, Morales, Gonzalez, Castillo	
SPP School B	5.2	Hernandez, Gonzalez, Castillo	
SPP School C	9.0		

While the district continues to expand the magnet system, often increasing the number of "partial" magnets by adding a program to a struggling neighborhood school with the hopes of improving its reputation and academic performance, the dichotomy of

desirable schools is evident in stark differences in enrollment numbers and waiting lists. The increasing notoriety—and thus increasing competition—for particular schools often leaves several hundred on the wait list for some programs and vacancies at others at Title I schools (CMS Planning Services, 2017). Though more Latinx families are engaging in the magnet school lottery due to improved information channels, patterns in their choice selection indicate that they are amidst the 36% increase of families applying across the district (CMS, 2017b). Even with the addition of several programs, magnet schools have spots for less than 20 percent of the district's population. Thus, as one participant, Sofía, recounted, "The application was easy. The difficult part is getting selected for the school that you want." After the first round of the lottery, when none of the families in her network had gained admission, she questioned if the timing of their submitted application, which they completed on the same day, requesting the same schools, had negatively influenced the families' chances of getting in. In their case, the weighted lottery did not provide them an advantage to admission. Though they attended a School Performance Priority (SPP) school and were given "priority" for admission into other school, none of the families was absorbed into these "overflow" non-magnet schools that were a part of their application. Because families did not apply until the middle or high school level, spots were even more limited, having been filled first by those continuing from magnet elementary schools as well as their siblings.

Families who "won" the lottery, gaining admission into a magnet school, often shared positive reviews/remarks of their experiences attending the alternative school. For Romina, the magnet school provided a variety of benefits for her son, from an elevated level of academic rigor to increased exposure to racial/ethnic diversity:

> The first day that he got there, he has homework, homework, projects, and everything… Brookmeade has more like, white people in there and I think he has never been in that area because he's always been with Hispanic, Black, [sic] and I think it's something new for him. He's doing good. Right there, there are a lot of people from different countries.

For Rosa, the satisfaction comes from the stable learning environment and the avoidance of social problems that often arise at the middle school level:

> We did not have problems and now Mateo went and another friend of his as well and we were happy. In fact, I've never gotten a report from Mateo at this time from the school, and you see that now they're older and one has fear that they're fighting on the bus or things like that. But I've never had a bad note from Mateo, nor problems with his friends, nor with other things like that which I had going to school.

In the case of both of these families, the admission of the oldest child into the magnet program meant that younger siblings—two in the Sanchez family and three in the Guerrero family—would also be able to share in the educational opportunity attending the magnet school.

Table 22: Traditional public elementary school and magnet elementary school data

Elementary School	*Hispanic*	*Students of Color*	*Low SES*	*Report Card Grade*	*Growth Status*
TP Elementary School					
Cypress Elementary	84%	97%	93%	D	Exceeded
Moore Elementary	49%	89%	81%	C	Exceeded
Hillside Elementary	56%	98%	98%	D	Exceeded
Magnet Elementary School					
Mountain View Montessori	6%	32%	10%	B	Met
Jefferson Montessori	9%	31%	22%	A	Exceeded
Erindale Traditional	6%	64%	39%	C	Met
Clarkson Traditional	9%	78%	40%	B	Not Met
Stonecrest Language Academy	62%	80%	37%	B	Not Met
Gleason Language Academy	19%	54%	21%	B	Exceeded
Sherwood Elementary (partial)	4%	84%	58%	C	Exceeded
Croston Elementary (partial)	22%	75%	72%	C	Met

Table 23: Traditional public middle school and magnet middle school data

Middle School	*Hispanic*	*Students of Color*	*Low SES*	*Report Card Grade*	*Growth Status*
TP Middle School					
Browne Middle	39%	90%	77%	D	Met
Delano Middle	48%	96%	94%	F	Not Met
Magnet Middle School					
Brookmeade Middle	20%	65%	33%	B	Not Met
Magnet (Arts)	6%	63%	31%	B	Exceeded
Magnet (STEM)	33%	85%	5%	C	Exceeded
Magnet (World Languages)	19%	54%	21%	B	Exceeded
Macungie Middle (partial)	35%	75%	51%	C	Exceeded

Families who engaged in the educational marketplace through public magnet schools yet did not "win" the lottery were left contemplating any remaining options beyond their zoned TPS. The option of moving—employing residential choice—was frequently mentioned by participants as desirable yet seemingly impossible. For some,

the biggest impediments were not just the lack of economic resources, but being an undocumented immigrant carried an added layer of difficulty. Camila shared the complexities of apartment searching as a single Latinx mother:

> Yes, I have searched there, those apartments, there aren't any. There's no space. And I want to go because they're assigned good schools, the same rent is $900. But I tell you, that they asked so much of a deposit—the problem is that, to gather the $1800. How? And sometimes at certain apartments…depending what one wants, they ask this, they ask the other, sometimes we don't tell them with this type of documents. That's the problem.

The lack of affordable housing in locations with higher-performing schools made relocating challenging enough, plus Camila had to find an agreeable landlord who would accept her forms of identification.

Alternately, she presented another option known to her: using a false address to receive a better school assignment. Though others she knew had gone this route, she expressed grave concern, considering the heightened implications a penalty carried her as an immigrant:

> They got another address and I don't want to do that because I have friends in that area but it's not correct. One of them looked for an address and the others here and later on if they investigate it is a problem.

Finally, for other participants, the consideration of moving seemed beyond practical because of what it meant sacrificing. Sofía explained:

> I've had those thoughts. I think that—well, after this first lottery—I'd like to move into an area more central, a place with very good schools, but it's not easy.

> Because my children say, “Mommy, stay, these are my friends, I'm not going to leave my friends.” But yes, I've thought about that, I'd like to change schools...Obviously, it is financial, but also, really the only family that I have here is my children and her [neighbor], she cares for my children. If I move to the other side, I think, who am I going to leave them with? Who's going to pick them up? But, well, like they say, you can't move forward without taking risks, but it's like starting over.

Because many participants in this study were immigrants who had come to the country with little to no family at all, the relationships established with fellow residents in their neighborhoods assumed kinship ties and secured needed support. As evident by Sofía’s response, a move across the city for the sake of a better school/educational opportunity was comparable to beginning life in the United States all over again.

Summary

In the second part of this chapter, I explained the patterns, factors, and impact of Latinx families’ participation in school choice in great detail. Analyzing their engagement in each sector of the marketplace, findings revealed a majority of parents applying to public magnet schools, as the home school option was not mentioned, private schools were out of reach for the one family who looked into them, and charter schools were unfamiliar options to all but one family. Though parents sought to utilize their individual and cultural assets to obtain improved educational opportunities beyond their TPS, they faced numerous constraints in their participation due to their social stratification as immigrants with limited financial resources. These findings and their implications will be discussed further in the fifth and final chapter.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I provide a summative discussion of my findings in relation to previously existing literature on the topic. In order to highlight the contributions of the current analysis, I connect the findings specifically to each of the three research questions as I position them within the broader literature. Additionally, I frame these interpretations through the three theories of market theory, reproduction theory, and Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit). Following this discussion, I share implications for policy and practice as well as recommendations for future research to outline clear steps for moving forward in providing equitable educational opportunities for the Latinx community.

Review of the Study

The rapid expansion of the Latinx population in the Charlotte Mecklenburg metropolitan area, combined with the group's often lower academic performance, creates an impetus for improved and comprehensive understanding of the educational needs of Latinxs, and for an investigation of the role the educational marketplace can play in meeting these needs. Previous research has suggested particularities and differences in this group's schooling decisions compared to other racial/ethnic groups, yet additional insights are needed to more accurately portray the knowledge, behaviors, values, and opinions of Latinxs. In this case study I examined the ways in which Latinxs are and are not participating in the school choice process in Mecklenburg County. Triangulating

multiple sources of data, I detailed the contexts and circumstances surrounding these findings. Specifically, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1) How do Latinx families in Mecklenburg County understand and navigate school choice options and select or not select a school for their child's education?
2) How do these decision-making processes vary within the Latinx community?
3) Does school choice advance greater access to high-quality education for Latinx families in Mecklenburg County? If so, how? If not, why?

Research Question One: How do Latinx families in Mecklenburg County understand and navigate school choice options and select or not select a school for their child's education?

Findings from this study revealed Latinx families' schooling decisions to be a largely collaborative process, far from a simplistic, model of "rational" choice they could undertake independently as a lone actor maximizing their self-interest. In fact, the complexity of the process manifests in multiple patterns described in this study: (1) their delayed participation until the middle or high school level, when they leveraged their individual and cultural assets to engage in choice, and (2) their limited participation in primarily the magnet and TPS sectors, where they were more informed and less inhibited by economic factors. These findings recognize the barriers Latinx parents faced both in making schooling decisions and in exercising options beyond their TPS. Hence, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that challenges and in some cases refutes the underlying assumptions of market theory that individuals are equally prepared as rational actors to make informed schooling decisions and that an expanded marketplace will offer more competitive and improved educational opportunities (Ball et al., 1996;

Bifulco et al., 2009; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Hawn Nelson et al., 2016; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Pearson et al., 2015; Pattillo, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Villavicencio, 2013). Referring to the themes presented in Chapter Four, I will further discuss aspects of the complexities of the choice process experienced by participating Latinxs. I then connect the findings to the larger theoretical and policy discussions about Latinxs, choice, and school opportunity.

Motivations, Preferences, and Aspirations

The study's findings show that among Latinx families who engage in choice, the process was largely initiated by families' motivation to avoid their TPS, which heightened during the transition periods heading to middle and/or high school. Contentment with their elementary school and an adherence to schooling assignments prior to Kindergarten kept almost all families at their TPS through fifth grade. However, as students approached the higher grades and families considered the many of the negative experiences of older siblings and/or those of friends or neighbors at their TPS, many families became increasingly motivated to seek alternatives to their assigned school. In the contexts of non-compulsory choice plans, such as this case in Mecklenburg County, parents' dissatisfaction with TPSs commonly provides such motivation to engage in choice (Haynes et al., 2010; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999), though families from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not always knowledgeable or able to utilize their options (Bell, 2009; Schneider et al., 2000; Teske et al., 2007; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017).

Looking more closely at the primary concerns of participants in pursuing alternative options, the intersecting themes of "seguridad" (safety) and "enseñanza" (teaching) permeated interview data. A multitude of researchers, often employing survey methodology, have identified academics as a primary criterion for school selection by parents across race/ethnicity (i.e. Schneider et al., 2000; Teske et al. 2007), yet through dialogue and follow-up questions, I was able to better understand the interconnectedness of these two factors for Latinx participants. These findings echo parents' perspectives from interview data of one other study focused on Latinx school choice. It reported parents describing the safety, discipline, and general learning environment inherently connected to students' academic performance (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). These factors, closely related to the Latinx cultural value of *educación* focused on respect and learning, were not perceived to be sufficiently established at their TP middle and high schools, where accounts of bullying, truancy, and disrespect were frequently reported. Previous studies have suggested that safety is more commonly cited as a top priority in schooling decisions by families of color and those of lower incomes (Haynes et al., 2010; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996; Smrekar & Honey, 2015).

What is not necessarily clear, however, are the referents to which parents in each of these respective studies were applying their perception of "safety." Respondents in this study made frequent references to accounts of violence, gangs, bullying, suicide, alcohol, and drugs as their causes for grave concern. Yet such a nebulous construct as "safety" holds varying degrees and meaning for others. This ambiguity was the focus of a recent study led by Sattin-Bajaj and colleagues (2018), revealing differences in how parents and students in New York City perceived and gathered information pertaining to dimensions

of "safety." Parents' conceptions of safety were often related to the conditions outside of the school, such as crime in the neighborhood surrounding it, whereas students' conceptions of safety often pertained to the conditions inside the school, such as bullying and fighting among students. Furthermore, research recognizes that "safety" also serves as a racial proxy by which White families make schooling decisions, rationalizing their desire to avoid options with higher populations of Black students (Billingham & Hunt, 2016). The frequent use of broad, generic terms in describing parents' choice criteria often norms parent behavior into common experiences rather than recognizing differing intentions and conditions associated with such criteria. Researchers' continued specificity in the meaning, contexts, and related measures of these determinants more powerfully illuminates the realities of schooling conditions facing our nation's most vulnerable populations.

As evidenced by Latinx families' contentment with their elementary school, the school community, outreach, and environment greatly influenced their perceptions of a school, often overriding any lower academic performance indicators, if they were aware of them. Though the elementary schools of this study did not have particularly high student proficiency ratings, families praised the staff, support, and communication they received from the school. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Joseph et al., 2017; Pearson et al., 2015), Latinx immigrant parents favored a school community in which their involvement was welcomed over an alternative, higher-performing option in which their efforts to participate were overlooked or dismissed. For some Latinx students and their parents, choosing between a neighborhood school and a magnet school represented a tension described by Cuero and colleagues (2009) respectively as between

"solidarity" and "status." Torn between remaining with more of their Latinx peers or opting for additional academic opportunities often in more White, middle-class communities, families' decisions reflected this tension. Lucia, a high schooler, opted for her neighborhood high school, which she described as offering "a home feeling." Yet Romina, mother of a rising sixth grader, encouraged her son to attend the magnet IB school, which she described as offering "a better future, a better job." In the charter school setting, Isabel was content that her children had smaller classes, no bullying, and caring teachers, but she acknowledged that she doesn't "speak Spanish to anyone there." Ultimately, all of these self-described gifted students fared very well with their respective schooling selections, but the complexity of their decision-making process further contradicts the simplistic, "rational" preference for academically high-performing schools assumed by market theory.

Furthermore, though parents in this study shared high aspirations for their children's educational experiences and sought the optimal conditions for their learning, many families' schooling preferences were guided by another factor: location. As recently explored by Saatcioglu, Snethen, and Chang-Rios (2018), this criteria for selecting a school can also act as an obstacle in the choice process. Many participating families cited the necessity for attending a school in close proximity to their home for ease of picking up a sick child, attending school events, and avoiding risks associated with driving while Latinx. A preference for their TPS often greatly restricted their options. Families did not consider magnet schools that were out of their transportation zone, and even within their options they only applied to schools less than 10 miles from their residence. The lone family participating in this study aware of charter school options

was able to transport children across the city with their own resources. For many other low-income families, relying on public transportation when busing is not provided by the district is a major impediment to school choice considerations (Condliffe et al., 2015; Pattillo, 2015). Studies investigating the influence of geospatial position (location of affordable housing) and dispositions (comfort and familiarity of housing) on schooling decisions similarly recognized the disproportionate constraints (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017) and narrowing of choice sets (Bell, 2009) for low-income families. Previously, Haynes and colleagues (2010) found that Latinxs more frequently noted this need for school proximity than did Blacks or Whites; moreover, this study heightens attention to current social contexts further compounding the issue. Whether the result of an economic constraint or a societal fear, this high regard for school location seemed to negatively impact Latinx families' aspirations of improved educational settings.

Information, Processes, & Navigation

Findings from this study pointed to Latinx parents' challenges in accessing information to exercise schooling options beyond their TPS. As parents recounted their decision-making process, they repeatedly expressed a reliance upon others in their social networks for knowledge of the choice system, about which they were largely unfamiliar as immigrants to the country. During the elementary years, families gained essential information from relationships stemming from the school, including teachers, staff, as well as other parents. Neighbors and friends also proved influential in their sharing of knowledge and experiences, particularly those whose children had attended schools under consideration. In this study, language, financial, and technological barriers prevented many parents from utilizing information channels via websites or open house visits.

School visits, in particular, were advocated both by the district (CMS, "Performance Data," n.d.) and in mainstream media (Stone, 2016) as valuable influences in the choice process, yet these Latinx participants did not often report using this resource. Smrekar and Goldring (1999) previously noted differences by social class in families' attendance at such events, with upper class families twice as likely to visit schools to inform their decisions.

Families without computer or Internet access, and those with limited English language skills were confronted with a lack of available information online. There are few school websites or resources in Spanish. While the district's choice website attempted to offer bilingual materials, many resources were not translated; only a handful of charter schools had any information or applications in Latinx parents' native language, suggesting that charter schools were not marketing to this population. Thus, instead of using such sources to make rational decisions for themselves, Latinx parents relied heavily on "word of mouth" and the recommendations of trusted, personal connections, including their own child(ren). This finding may reflect the growing complexity of the school choice process; while previous research has suggested low-income families (Smrekar & Honey, 2015), particularly Latinxs (Schneider et al., 2000), more often turn to formal sources of information, recent studies, in accordance with this one, recognize the growing dependency of Latinx parents on others, including school personnel (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Teske et al., 2007) and their own children (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015) in learning of schooling options. Consistent across all of these referenced studies, however, is the notable limitation in the depth of the social networks to which low-income families were connected.

Among those involved in the choice process, Latinx families' social capital was instrumental to their engagement in school choice. However, the limits of this resource were revealed in their exclusion from certain sectors of the educational marketplace. Data of the participation of Latinxs in the state voucher program and their enrollment in charter schools pointed to their underrepresentation in these forms of school choice, as noted in previous studies of North Carolina (Ladd et al., 2015; Malkus, 2016a). Without friends or neighbors who had attended charter or private schools, families were not exposed to these educational options, let alone able to overcome the additional costs associated with attending them. This finding is consistent with the information stratification (Bell, 2009) described in the extant literature (Gándara, 2010; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Orfield et al., 2012). Instead, Latinx parents were frequently advised by friends and neighbors to submit their application to the district's magnet school lottery, a process much more familiar to them. Teachers and other school personnel were extremely influential actors of Latinx families' schooling decisions. This finding indicates the higher levels of trust this ethnic group gives to education professionals (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Teske et al., 2007). However, families who benefitted most from these relationships were those whose parents who felt comfortable visiting the school and regularly communicated with staff, and/or those whose children performed well academically. The literature describes these situations are not common for the Latinx population (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Gallo, 2017; Orozco, 2008; Poza, et al., 2014; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Walker et al., 2011). Furthermore, even these sources provided Latinx families limited exposure to schooling alternatives, because most often this school support guided families through the magnet school sector only.

This study illuminated the influential role of students in the decision-making process, as many assumed clear ownership of the information search and application. While Teske and colleagues (2007) noted an unexpected level of their involvement, these findings are consistent with more recent work in presenting students' distinct leadership in the school selection process (Cuero et al., 2009; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015). Students as young as 11 years old, rising sixth-graders, introduced their parents to schooling options beyond their TPS, and often used their English language and technology skills to research schools. Alejandra acknowledged that her ninth-grade son was solely responsible for completing the application to his magnet high school, a "solitary chooser" (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015) who was likely informed by his teachers and peers. Others, like eleventh-grader Lucia, were more "family-focused" (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015) in turning to the experience and advice of older siblings and cousins for choosing a school. Lucia's parents greatly respected her leadership role in making such an important decision, as they recognized the difficulties themselves of obtaining information and understanding the nuances of the process. In other families, however, conflicts stemming from differing priorities and knowledge between parents and children surfaced. Interviews revealed discrepancies in what children, often at the technological helm of the application, submitted versus what parents wanted. Cuero and colleagues (2009) detailed the stress and tension felt by sixth grade Latina girls in managing the expectations of their teachers to apply to better academic options and the concerns of their parents to remain close to the familiarity of their community. While this study primarily focused on parents' perspectives through the school selection process, findings reiterate the additional difficulties experienced by

Latinx families in engaging their school choice options and challenge the normative views of the simplistic process purported by market theorists and choice advocates.

Summary

Through this discussion I have situated the findings of this study within the larger literature to deepen understanding of Latinx families' experiences and perceptions of schools and the choice process. Highlighting the unique characteristics and contexts of this group's knowledge and decisions, I sought to expand normative conceptions of the choice process that have previously ignored the influences of diverse students' cultural backgrounds and social experiences on schooling decisions. Despite attempts to leverage cultural assets of aspirational, social, familial, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005), Latinx families faced numerous barriers and additional hardships in exercising agency and access to various schooling options. I discuss the impact and significance of these findings while addressing additional research questions.

Research Question Two: How do these decision-making processes vary within the Latinx community?

Findings from this study described Latinx parents' schooling decisions following a typical pattern of enrollment in their TPS during the elementary years, then an application to magnet schools during the transition to middle or high school levels. Ultimately, one family ended up with children at two charter schools across town, just over half who applied got into a magnet school of their choice, and three did not pursue options beyond their TPS (refer to Tables 5, 6, and 7). It is notable that the no families used residence as a form of choice, though that was a typical practice of Mecklenburg County participants who were predominantly non-Latinx and more representative of

varied social classes (Hawn Nelson et al., 2016). All families in this study first sought affordable housing, then addressed schooling options. With such limitations in their participation, no family would be considered a "market maven" (Teske et al., 2007), or highly informed with sufficient resources to exercise any preference of educational opportunity. Given that previous research has shown race and socio-economic status to be predictors of participation in school choice (Ball et al., 1996; Bifulco et al., 2009; Schneider et al., 2000; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999), this is likely on account of the characteristics of the study's sample, which predominantly included families of low socio-economic status and limited formal education, characteristics common among Latinxs in the United States.

However, a more nuanced examination of their selection processes and experiences revealed noteworthy variance, even within this subset of 17 families. All parents were first generation immigrants who had resided in the United States for over a decade, yet they hailed from Mexico as well as various countries in Central America: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador Nicaragua. Education levels ranged from only a few years of formal schooling to diplomas from secondary/high school in their native country; accordingly, many were limited in their occupational opportunities in the United States, and most fathers reported employment in the construction or restaurant industries and most mothers cared for their children at home and/or cleaned houses. The variance in families' income levels was primarily evidenced by their home/living environment, where the interviews took place, and other references to material goods; in this way, three families stood out as more financially secure as modest home owners possessing more than one vehicle, and others less stable residing in rented townhomes or apartments,

sometimes with no personal means of transportation. Only one mother was fluent in English, having immigrated as a teenager and attended a few years of schooling in the United States. Others varied in their self-reported levels of language proficiency, including literacy levels in their native Spanish language.

These factors, and other less visible characteristics, often played a role in their decision-making process of selecting a school, as I will describe in the following sections. Although this study primarily focused on parents' experiences and deliberations in the school choice process, interview data revealed the collaborative nature of families' decisions involving siblings and students themselves. Thus, while drawing on extant literature of parent behaviors in school choice (Bell, 2009; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Schneider et al., 2000; Teske et al., 2007; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017), I will integrate the limited additional studies focused on Latinx student-led choosers (Cuero et al., 2009; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015), calling attention to the various factors that shape the schooling decisions of this sample of marginalized community members.

Family-guided Choosers

In a few families, adults took the concerted lead in schooling decisions, navigating resources as possible to support their search for information through multiple channels. They used formal print and web-based sources, social networks, and site visits. Educated at least through the high school level, these active, confident mothers utilized available materials in Spanish and made their best attempt to learn about the various magnet school programs. However, they also leaned heavily on the English language skills and experiential insight of an older child in order to navigate schooling options. Valentina, for one, mentioned starting to pursue bilingual options for her twin boys

before they entered Kindergarten. Having a daughter much older than her boys, she used her experiences going through schools in New York and then Charlotte to learn of the magnet school lottery process. What information she could not find herself in newspapers she sought directly from bilingual personnel, visiting the district's Family Center, attending the magnet school fair, and consulting the elementary school secretary. Isabel, also a secondary school graduate from Mexico, was also a regular visitor to her children's elementary school and was almost always accompanied by her oldest daughter, a graduate of the public school system, who aided her by communicating in either English or Spanish. Because neither mother worked full time and did not have additional children at home, they each had the flexibility to be more involved in the community and to spend time investigating options beyond the TPS.

These social connections supplemented information they needed to apply to the district's magnet school lottery and ultimately made the difference in their level of satisfaction with their schooling decisions. Both families were admitted to their top school in the second round of the lottery. For Isabel and her family, however, confusion in the name of a school resulted in an unfamiliar assignment a considerable distance from their house. Consequently, they continued to search for alternatives to the their TPS and were referred to a charter school by the librarian of their TP elementary school. By chance, their name was chosen from the waitlist, and the family's economic resources turned the option into a reality. But they scrambled to coordinate logistics to get their child to and from the charter school. Throughout this process, Isabel's oldest daughter played a pivotal role in communicating with schools. Additionally, the available time, vehicle, and funding requirements were necessary for exercising this charter school

option. Counter to normative expectations of the simplistic process involving an individual parent's systematic research and application to their school of choice, these accounts portray the laborious and extensive process required to participate in the marketplace, particularly for families without the assumed privileges of time, education and knowledge, linguistic skills in English, social support, and financial resources (Bell, 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Stein & Nagro, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013).

Personnel-guided Choosers

The choice process was unfamiliar and often daunting for many families, especially for those making schooling decisions for their oldest/first child. Parents frequently formed perceptions of their TPS from chatter circulating through the neighborhood and learned of the magnet school option from friends and family. However, if there were no older children in the family they relied primarily on school personnel for knowledge of which schools to select on their application. When asked to explain the reasons for their ranking of their magnet school selections, some participants often responded that they were following the advice given to them by teachers or staff. For example, Romina shared, "Ms. – said these were the best." Natalia and Elena went to the district's Family Center precisely for such advice, expecting the employees to provide guidance not only on how to use the computers to complete the application, but also to tell them which ones to select. Limitations of time, either stemming from full-time work or caring for additional younger children, and of language and education further prompted families to seek professional advice rather than make decisions on their own.

Because the parent involvement literature (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Moreno & Valencia, 2011; Poza et al., 2014; Valdés, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002; Walker et al., 2011) as well as research on school choice (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Teske et al., 2007) have recognized the high levels of respect and trust Latinxs hold for education professionals, these findings are not surprising. However, this dependency on school personnel to participate more broadly in the educational marketplace challenges theoretical assumptions of parents as the most informed, rational actors and the equal capacities of low-income parents to make decisions based upon accurate knowledge of schools and their programs. The increasing variety of schools as well as the vast array of information available about schools, is a complex system much more navigable by well-educated, privileged parents with the time and resources to do (Bell, 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Stein & Nagro, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013). In Mecklenburg County, consultants were also available to those with the financial means to pay for expert advice and guidance (field notes, November 9, 2017). Families with limited economic and informational resources, however, such as the participants of this study, had to turn instead to the professional resources available to them, which were the teachers, staff, and employees of the school district whose system they were trying to navigate.

Student-led Choosers

As previously described, many students themselves were leading the selection for their middle or high school. With a myriad of factors restricting parents' available information and their access to information channels—working full-time, caring for younger siblings, limited language proficiencies and literacy skills—parents were often

unaware of schooling options beyond their TPS. Thus, it became the role of their children to introduce and navigate these opportunities to parents. Though earlier studies hinted at student involvement in parents' schooling decisions (Teske et al., 2007), this study's findings revealed students' expanding and influential role in determining their educational opportunities. Children as young as 11 years old began to assume ownership of their schooling experiences, with most being described as high-achieving and responsible students who often obtained advice from teachers, guidance counselors, and peers. While this level of involvement and ownership on the part of such students can be seen as exemplary and laudable, the implication for those children who do not take such initiative themselves is often then a lack of awareness and guidance of their schooling options.

Previous research examining student-led choosers has recognized how differences in the orientations adopted by students affect their schooling decisions, specifically how consistent and stable messaging across school, home, and peer contexts benefitted higher-income gifted and talented students (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). The perspectives of students, especially those struggling in school, were not explored in this study, nor are they present in related literature. However, such a study would contribute significantly to this conversation on schooling decisions. Additionally, previous research has recognized the turmoil experienced by gifted students in managing tensions between the expectations of their teachers and those of their parents (Cuero et al., 2009). In this study, parents were most often supportive of their children's guidance and decisions, yet there were instances in which their concerns stemming from financial restrictions placed more concern with location and logistics of transportation than academic opportunity. Students often

mentioned wanting to follow peers to their next school; again, this speaks to the influence of social groups (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014) yet raise important questions about the judgments of children in making such important decisions.

Non-choosers

Three families did not participate in the choice process and thus their children remained in their TPS. Lacking awareness, information, guidance, and social status, parents gained no additional schooling options despite the expansion of the educational marketplace in North Carolina and Mecklenburg County. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, I was able to glean a more nuanced understanding of additional factors contributing to their isolation as well as the variance even within this subgroup.

One family was completely unaware of the magnet school lottery or any other options beyond their assigned TPS, while the other two either missed deadlines or experienced other setback/difficulties in their search attempts. Two of the families had at least one parent with extremely limited formal education and literacy in Spanish or English, which considerably hindered their access to information, as has been shown in previous studies (Condliffe et al., 2015; Cuero et al., 2009; Haynes et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015). Interview data suggested these non-choosing families also had limited social networks, with one father reporting a reliance on his sister-in-law for schooling information and one mother describing herself as more reserved and without access to the collective guidance or insight of neighbors and friends. This finding, too, supports arguments pointing to the limitations of social capital for spanning social class boundaries, particularly for Latinx communities (Gándara, 2010; Orfield et al., 2012).

Finally, in each of these cases, the children, all fifth-graders, were not self-initiating a search for alternatives to their TPS. Their parents did not report them bringing home information about the choice process. All families referenced additional academic support their child was receiving at the school, suggesting that these students experienced more learning difficulties at school, all of which could affect their experiences, dispositions, and, consequently, their engagement in choosing a school (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014).

Summary

In detailing the decision-making processes of these Latinx families, I have further explicated the factors affecting families' engagement in the school choice process. Despite some commonalities within the study's sample, the differences in education levels, language skills, family structure, and social networks, largely stemming from income or class-based influences, result in variances in parent and children behavior that shape their schooling decisions. While this research question addressed differences that occurred in their process and engagement related to choice, the next section will more fully discuss the impact of the outcomes of their behaviors.

Research Question Three: Does school choice advance greater access to high-quality education for Latinx families in Mecklenburg County? If so, how? If not, why?

Through the expansion of schooling options, market theorists posit that consumer demand and subsequent competition will raise the quality of schools across all sectors of the marketplace. While numerous studies have sought the empirical data to evaluate the validity of these ideological assumptions, results are largely inconclusive (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2008; CREDO, 2013; Hoxby, 2003;

Jabbar, et al., 2017; Sass, 2006; Wohlstetter et al., 2013). Researchers recognize the need for a highly contextualized understanding of the choice policies, schools, and students under investigation (Jabbar et al., 2017). This case study identified the school choice policies in place in Mecklenburg County as including home school, private school (with and without Opportunity Scholarship vouchers), public charter schools, public magnet schools, and traditional public schools (TPSs). It detailed the participating Latinx families whose experiences were described and analyzed. Because of the qualitative nature of this study and the associated nebulous definition of "high-quality," the construct as discussed here refers to parents' satisfaction with the school that their child(ren) attended. In this way I describe participants' perceptions of the schooling options ultimately afforded them, and I offer a concurrent analysis of the educational opportunities available to Latinx students. By highlighting both opportunities and barriers in their access, and relating these to the broader literature, I extend the conversation towards future directions to promote more equitable policies and practices.

Satisfied Families

Families expressing satisfaction with their child's school often described conditions or characteristics matching those of their ideal school—one in which students experienced a rigorous curriculum, abundant learning opportunities with caring, supportive teachers in a safe, orderly learning environment. High-quality middle schools challenged children every day with homework and projects, and high schools offered students opportunities to take classes to prepare them for college and future occupations. Parents reported that their children enjoyed being at school and were motivated to learn and achieved high grades. Clear and consistent communication with teachers fostered

strong relationships between home and school. Especially as students progressed through high school, parents were pleased to hear of few incidences of fighting or other social problems affecting their child(ren). The racial/ethnic diversity of the schools was also appreciated; many parents commented positively on having the opportunity for their children to interact with and learn alongside people of different backgrounds than their own.

Magnet schools. These self-described high-quality schooling options were most often experienced by students who had gained a spot in their preferred public magnet school. The contexts described closely mirror the elements Ayscue and colleagues (2018) observed that contribute to positive outcomes: rigorous instruction that fosters positive interactions, structures that support students and relationships, and intensive and meaningful family and community engagement. Families who won the lottery attended schools with a variety of magnet programs—language academies, International Baccalaureate, STEM, and health sciences—with busing provided by the district. For Latinx families who had expressed numerous economic and social concerns for driving, this transportation was instrumental to their enrollment, as it has proven for low-income families in numerous other studies (Condliffe et al., 2015; Cuero et al., 2009; Haynes et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015).

Additional efforts by the district to increase representation of Latinx families—the result of a recent evaluation by CMS and Magnet Schools of America (2015)—included the lifting of admissions requirements for some schools, as also advocated by magnet school scholars (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). Although the children of many participating families in this study had high academic achievement,

Andrés and Mariana in particular noted the struggles of their children in reading. Their oldest son, a student with identified special needs and Limited English Proficiency, was able to apply and fortunately gain admission to a STEM middle school.

Recent revisions to the district's student assignment plan put into place a weighted lottery to improve the socio-economic balance of magnet schools, another strategy proven to support participation from families of color or low-income households (Alves & Willie, 1987; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). While several families had applied and been admitted in previous years and younger siblings continued in their academic path with a guaranteed spot at the same school, two families gained new admission in this year's lottery. Additional data is needed to assess the impact of this change for the greater Latinx population in the district.

Finally, families' admission into these high-quality magnet schools largely rested on the support they received in completing the application. Each family reported having personal guidance from at least one school personnel—a teacher, guidance counselor, secretary, family advocate, or Communities in Schools coordinator. Having informed, intentional outreach, particularly with bilingual staff has shown to improve information channels for historically underserved populations, such as the Latinx community (Dougherty et al., 2013; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017). Few families attended open houses or information sessions to learn more about schools. Thus, findings from this study emphasize the importance of information coming from the ground up, directly from schools and the trusted relationships with known personnel.

Charter schools. One family's depiction of high-quality schooling stemmed from their children's experiences in charter schools, one at the elementary level and two at the

middle school level. Having learned of the middle school option from a teacher at their elementary TPS only a few days before the start of the school year the previous year, Isabel and her oldest daughter, Yazmin, a bilingual high school graduate, quickly visited and applied. Though reportedly far down the waiting list, the family quickly learned of an available spot for their rising sixth grader, and together they scrambled to submit the necessary paperwork to secure her enrollment. The following year, Isabel enrolled her next daughter, and found an elementary charter for her youngest son, then a fourth grader.

Yazmin's English language skills were, and continue to be, pivotal for understanding and communicating information from the school because of its lack of bilingual staff. Her ability to drive also helps significantly—without transportation provided by the charter schools, she helps get her siblings to and from school daily. The family admits that the commutes are taxing—requiring about 40 minutes one-way—because of city traffic on top of the roughly 13 to 15 miles they drive to the schools. In addition to these opportunity costs of time and transportation, the children do not receive lunch and sometimes have additional fees to cover necessary materials or to support fundraisers for the schools. Because of the schools' strong academic support and zero tolerance for bullying, the family considers the extra efforts worth it.

Their experiences, however, underscore the complexities of exercising choice options, and echo the findings of numerous studies challenging the oversimplistic process posited by market theorists and advocates (Ball et al., 1996; Bell, 2009; Bifulco et al., 2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Pattillo, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Villavicencio, 2013). Isabel's knowledge of charter schools was

contingent upon on her constant presence in her children's school and her strong relationships with staff; additional research has suggested Latinx families are often unaware of the charter school option (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). Moreover, the family's financial resources were required to permit their attendance; as such, the charter school option remains elusive for low-income families who are unable to finance these accommodations themselves.

Traditional public schools. Though there were few current high school students involved in this study, one stood out in particular for her strong advocacy of her neighborhood high school. Having attended her TPS for elementary school, then an IB magnet for middle school, Lucia explained that she returned to her TPS for high school because of transportation concerns and because of the positive experience of her cousin, already in attendance there. An honors student, Lucia was taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses, received several awards, participated in countywide leadership programs, and overall felt very supported by her teachers. Because she remained in solidarity with many of culturally similar peers (Cuero et al., 2009), she felt the school had a "home feeling," despite its poor reputation and dismal performance ratings.

Interestingly, Lucia also noted that all the recent changes to the student assignment plan were a bit "confusing," and she was unaware that she could have continued her middle school IB program at her high school TPS. Though she lauded her current teachers, as the leader of schooling decisions in her family, Lucia seemed to need additional guidance to take advantage of all the educational opportunities available to her at her TPS. In her research examining the student-led schooling decisions of eighth graders in New York City's compulsory choice program, Sattin-Bajaj (2014) recognized

the gaps in access to high-quality educational opportunities existing along lines of class and ethnicity, with lower income Latin American immigrants more likely to be "undermatched" in their high school assignments. Recognizing that students themselves are often at the forefront of such educational decisions, more strategic efforts to inform and guide them directly might strengthen their participation and subsequent schooling opportunities.

Revisions to the district's student assignment plan included boundary changes aimed at creating more socioeconomically balanced schools, affecting the trajectories of several participants in the Moore and Cypress feeder patterns. Discontent with their middle and high school TPS options, two mothers had repeatedly applied to the magnet school lottery. While they were unsuccessful, they maintained hopes of receiving an alternative assignment for their middle schoolers. As the changes in the student assignment plan occurred with their oldest children transitioning to high school, Camila and Marta both disengaged from the magnet school lottery, now content with their child's assigned school. Once zoned for a low-performing high school whose student population consisted of 97 percent of students of color and 94 percent of students of low socio-economic status, their children were now assigned to an affluent, majority White high school, where the graduation rate was nearly 20 points higher, over half of teachers were veterans versus novices, and suspensions were less than district averages rather than above. It remains to be seen if their experiences match their mothers' expectations.

Boundary changes also affected their middle schools. Families from Cypress Elementary were slated to attend a reputable, predominantly white and affluent school, but not until the 2019-2020 school year. Participants in this study were confused and

frustrated that the changes would not affect their rising sixth grader, and all applied to the magnet school lottery. Families from Moore Elementary were still assigned to Browne Middle, but their peers would change, with students from a predominantly White, affluent middle school filling the empty spots from the departing Cypress Elementary children. Participating families were largely unaware of these changes to the demographics of Browne, and their perceptions of the school remained negative. Again, it remains to be seen if their experiences and perceptions shift with the proposed changes.

Dissatisfied Families

Families expressing dissatisfaction with their child's school shared detailed accounts of many negative interactions shaping their perceptions. Middle and high school students suffered from bullying and fighting in the hallway, on the bus, in the bathrooms, and even in the classrooms where they were berated by teachers. Those with learning disabilities in particular had difficulty with peers and did not receive adequate attention to their special needs. Parents described their frustrations trying to be involved and advocate for their child; challenges abounded in communicating with staff, gaining respect of teachers, and having their voice heard. Even parents wishing to volunteer to support the school felt unwanted and turned away. Often unable to provide guidance for their children academically, parents sought help from their older children and neighbors when their children were not receiving adequate instruction and support from classroom teachers. Parents wished their children could have additional educational opportunities to support literacy in their native Spanish as well as extracurricular activities to learn the arts, gardening, and to establish positive peer relationships.

Students at such described undesirable schools were attending their TPS. Some families, the non-choosers previously described in research question two, were unaware or unable to access any schooling alternatives. Excluded from the knowledge and the resources to attend home schools, private schools, charter schools, or magnet schools, their educational opportunity remained the same in underperforming, racially and economically segregated school regardless of choice policies. Such barriers have proven disproportionately limiting for parents with fewer financial resources and less educational attainment (Ball et al., 1996; Bifulco et al., 2009; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Pearson et al., 2015; Pattillo, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999; Villavicencio, 2013). Likewise, for choosers who did enter the magnet school lottery but didn't gain admission, their net result was the same, as their only option ultimately was their TPS.

In sum, just over half the families participating in this study had a child whose educational opportunity was unchanged by state and local choice policies. This finding is similar outcomes for other low-income Latinx families (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). Furthermore, there was no evidence that competition from an expanded educational marketplace was producing better conditions or higher achievement at their TPS, as theorists purported (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 1998, 2003). Thus, these findings contribute to a growing body of literature revealing how market-based reform policies have failed to fulfill their promise of offering improved educational opportunity for our nation's students, particularly our most vulnerable children. In the next sections I will detail the

mechanisms that served to maintain privilege for the upper class and simultaneously to exclude access for the lower class, thereby reproducing existing social stratifications.

System design. As detailed throughout this study, the school choice process was far from the simple, systematic, "rational" action described in theory; in practice, each step was laden with unrecognized complexities and inaccurate assumptions, particularly for these immigrant Latinx families. Findings suggest the normative expectation of parents' awareness and access to knowledge of alternative options to one's TPS was not a realized practice and instead resided in the parents' social connections and children. In a non-compulsory system in which families must voluntarily initiate engagement, schools tend to "compete" for the most valuable consumers, those who are easy to educate, require fewest expenditures, and contribute their own financial resources (Jennings, 2010; Ladd et al., 2015; Malkus, 2016a). The general lack of bilingual websites, materials, and programs suggests that aside from a handful of charters, the district's magnet schools were the only choice sector marketing to Latinxs. With a limited supply of spots in desirable schools, such information stratification served to reproduce the advantage of the privileged in preserving access to alternative schools. Reeves (2017) proposed that such an education system is designed by the upper middle class to be intentionally complex to restrict access and participation from other social classes. While this study does not offer direct evidence of this intentionality, participation patterns are consistent with it.

Information. Next, the data and information available to support parents' research and selection of schools reinforced stratifications rather than worked to reform them. With more challenges to accessing and comprehending information, low-income families are often disadvantaged through the process of information dissemination (Bell,

2009; Darby & Saatcioglu, 2015; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015; Schneider et al., 2000; Stein & Nagro, 2015; Villavicencio, 2013). Additionally, as recognized by Jacobsen and colleagues (2014), rather than promoting "more thoughtful deliberations about school quality," (p. 20), the manner in which school performance data is presented can greatly shape public opinion of schools. For example, the state's school report cards—rarely referenced by participating Latinx families in this study yet often used by non-Latinx families in another Mecklenburg County study (Hawn Nelson et al., 2016)—labeled a school with a letter grade mirroring academic proficiency levels; given the correlation between schools' performance grades and poverty levels, they essentially inform readers of demographics of student populations (Fitzsimon, 2015). Furthermore, because of the close connection between these school evaluations and the housing market, social stratification is reproduced with continued investment in affluent neighborhoods (Bogin & Nguyen-Hoang, 2014). Both the school report cards and demographic information of charter schools in Mecklenburg County reflect a national trend of increasing segregation by income level (Leibowitz & Page, 2015; Reardon, 2016). Because these are choice schools, their enrollment patterns also relate to research recognizing parent preferences to select a school that reflects their personal identity (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014), and in which their child will join the racial majority (Henig, 1996; Saporito, 2003). Participating families of this study often made schooling decisions based on word of mouth and reputation, behavior which challenges theoretical assumptions of the rational process which parents follow, using reliable data or criteria to guide them.

Siting. Just as previous research has suggested (Bell, 2009; Haynes et al., 2010; Smrekar & Honey, 2015; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017), findings from this study pointed to the great influence of geographic location on families' schooling decisions. Zoned for a low-performing and highly segregated middle and high schools, families were motivated to pursue alternatives, which led them to engage in the choice process. Data shows CMS to be the most racially and socio-economically segregated district in the state (Clotfelter et al., 2015) and demographics of charter schools in Mecklenburg County also reflect such segregation patterns (Hawn Nelson, 2017). As highlighted by a previous study of Mecklenburg County families (Hawn Nelson et al., 2016), the close linkage between housing and education markets advantages wealthier students whose parents utilize residential choice to have more perceived higher-quality schools near their home. The low-income Latinx families of this study were disproportionately distanced from high-quality schools because of their housing decisions; the lack of affordable housing, compounded by difficulties surrounding their immigration status, prevented families from moving to neighborhoods in closer proximity to desired alternative schools. These geospatial constraints (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017) have previously been shown to impair low-income families' access to and exercise of choice options, and additional related concerns with transportation further narrow families' choice sets (Bell, 2009). The district's magnet school program offered busing to schools within families' respective transportation zones, and families had nearly 10 or more program options available when ranking their preferred schools; however, parents often still made choices based on proximity and reputation and weren't fully informed of changes or new programs. Consequently, families often applied for spots at the same few schools within their

transportation zone. Notably, following revisions to the student assignment plan, two families abstained from participating in the magnet school lottery once their children were rezoned for a more affluent and more reputable school. Further analyses of the intersection of housing patterns and schooling decisions can inform future siting decisions to support more equitable access to high-quality schools (Ayscue, 2016; Smrekar & Honey, 2015; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017).

Conclusions

Through this discussion I aimed to distinguish theoretical positions of the impact of school choice policies on the Latinx community in Mecklenburg County. To revisit the theoretical framework of this study, market theory purports that the expanded educational marketplace offers Latinx families additional schooling options to their TPS and simultaneously drives competition that raises the performance of all schools in the area. Reproduction theory asserts that institutions such as schools and, more broadly, the education system, serve as mechanisms of reproducing social stratification and maintaining imbalances of power. LatCrit specifically recognizes the ways in which race and racism affect one's experiences in society and challenges norms and assumptions of the universality of the White experience. Models such as Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth highlight the cultural assets of Latinas/os to focus on the value, rather than the deficit, members bring to society.

Findings of this study suggest that families' understanding, participation, and educational opportunity were limited in many ways related to social class and racial/ethnic, linguistic, and immigrant status, despite the numerous cultural assets they possessed or sought to leverage. While this is consistent with core tenets of LatCrit,

neither market theory nor Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth takes into account the barriers experienced by Latinxs and the institutional structures restricting their educational opportunity. Choice policies and the associated "marketplace" are established in the normative White experience: they oversimplify the school selection process and are writ with assumptions of values, resources, and privileges incongruent with Latinxs' perspectives. While parents' various forms of "capital" were helpful throughout their selection process, their value was not equivalent to the linguistic, political, and economic privileges associated with the selection process—time, transportation, residence, education, and social networks. Yosso's contribution lies in its recognition of the cultural strengths of Latinx families and communities that enrich daily lives. However, the model cannot be reconciled with the overwhelming obstacles from the educational structures of opportunity as designed. Additionally, the social, cultural, and financial capital of privileged families are no match in choice processes. Thus, school choice represents such a mechanism of reproducing social stratification as described by reproduction theory with its preservation of educational opportunity for the already privileged.

In this way, too, this study demonstrates the intersection of racism and classism as presented by LatCrit. By detailing the inequities experienced by this marginalized population, this research exposes the inherent contradiction of an education system in a democratic society that is based on seemingly neutral market principles of individualism and competition. Though market theorists tend to advocate for the benefits of increased competition among schools in the educational marketplace, they ignore the associated conflicts of self-interest among consumers—democratic citizens—promoted through this

system. Instead, a false sense of individual agency is manifested through the element of choice (Pattillo, 2015). Schooling decisions have shown to ultimately relate to an individual's social position. The illusion of choice as opportunity for all detracts attention from the comparative lack of economic and political opportunity afforded to those less affluent and less privileged. In a nation in which economic disparities are rapidly increasing (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Reardon, 2016; Reeves, 2017), the government's deflection of responsibility to provide equitable access to high-quality education places a disproportionate burden on already disadvantaged groups (Cuero et al., 2009; Condliffe et al, 2015; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Darby and Saatcioglu, 2015; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Pattillo, 2015; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

In Mecklenburg County, for the Latinx community in particular, this market-based approach is alarming because of the conflicting position in which immigrant parents find themselves under in the current political contexts. Expected to assume a more assertive role in locating and securing educational opportunity for their children while simultaneously compelled to maintain an unobtrusive presence in society, Latinx parents face an inequitable dilemma in today's education system. In speaking to the shifting climate in recent years, Antonio shared his poignant thoughts:

> It [political change] will affect us in many ways if we want to be involved, because sometimes out of fear, we don't want to be seen; because we won't go out into the light in one form or the other, maybe we'll just [aim to] be hidden.

As evidenced by the lack of marketing to Latinxs in choice schools in Mecklenburg County, relying on competitors in the educational marketplace to meet the educational needs of this marginalized group is both unrealistic and insufficient. It is our nation's

responsibility to educate all our children not in a way that only seeks to strengthen our economic position, but in a way that strengthens our commitment to the democratic ideals on which it was founded.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study's findings generate important implications for policy and practice, particularly as it revealed numerous instances of inequity stemming from the current implementation of choice policies. Continued under present contexts, the system stands to further exacerbate growing inequalities and segregation by income and race as it reproduces privilege for already advantaged populations. Thus, most urgently policymakers must look comprehensively at the impact of choice policies both at a state and local level, and leaders must critically examine the system's alignment with goals to prepare every child "for work, further education, and citizenship" (NC DPI, "Mission and Requirements," n.d.). As previously argued, a market-based system rooted in individualism and competition stands in stark contrast to the democratic beliefs that characterize our citizenship. *If* fully committed to implementing a democratic (rather than stratified) choice system, the government must be prepared to equip all public education sectors—charter, magnet, and TPSs—with adequate funding and resources to ensure equitable participation. This entails considerable investment in multiple systems, schools, and the choice process itself, including the transportation, personnel, and information dissemination required to mitigate the barriers illuminated in this study. These initiatives and efforts are further detailed in the following sections.

Diversity Goals

As suggested by this research, school choice policies implemented in isolation and unsupported by equitable information dissemination result in exclusion and segregation along lines of income and race/ethnicity. Furthermore, because additional research has pointed to the benefits of integrated learning environments (Allport, 1954; Johnson, 2011; Kurlaender & Yun, 2005; Mickelson, 2014; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008; Wells & Crain, 1994) and participating families of this study cited diversity as a characteristic of high-quality schools, policies are needed to require intentional efforts to secure access and representation across social class and cultures. Diversity goals with specific action steps to recruit and support diverse populations should be part of schools' missions and charters with systems of accountability and oversight to ensure goals are being met. Though the magnet sector of CMS provides examples of strategic marketing efforts to inform and attract Latinx families, the system must be cautious of trends shifting focus away from its original aims of diversity (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011).

Weighted lottery. This supports a balance of student populations across schools (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017), rather than reflect their surroundings, which might be more segregated. This practice was recently adopted for magnet school lottery; in North Carolina, four of the state's 168 charters give priority to low-income students' applications (Doss Helms, 2017a).

Design. Many Latinx families stated preferences for schools that would offer bilingual education to support their children's language development in English as well as their native Spanish. The charter sector in particular seems to lack this learning focus.

Marketing. Family outreach and information sessions at schools and in other familiar settings, such as the neighborhood, recreation centers, churches, advocacy agencies, and other frequently visited sites familiar to Latinx families present schooling information with a more grassroots approach.

Siting. The location of schools greatly affects Latinxs' decisions, but even more so the location of affordable housing in comfortable communities. Coordination among education, housing, and transportation sectors could facilitate more diverse enrollment. Alternatively, siting schools in diverse neighborhoods also creates more opportunities for integration.

Information and Guidance

Because of the complexity of the choice process, the school district or chartering authority needs to offer improved support in the navigation of schooling options. A central information hub, a website supported by the Family Resource Center described below, would provide comprehensive information about all schools in one location (Ayscue, 2016). This resource needs to provide succinct videos and handouts that clearly outline processes and access to applications; all materials (including websites) should be available in multiple languages and use texts of appropriate levels of readability (Stein & Nagro, 2014).

Family resource center. While CMS maintains a Family Center to support enrollment throughout the year, there needs to be a place for families to receive information about all schooling options and can assist with all applications. Furthermore, considering the size and spread of the county, efforts need to be made to increase presence in the Latinx community to those not living within close proximity, extending

outreach in collaboration with schools and trusted personnel (and to facilitate introductions to extend trust and make use of these employees' expertise).

Coordinated efforts across various sectors. Because parents, particularly at the elementary level, lacked access to information, the following sectors can better serve as outlets for getting information out into the community rather than expecting individuals or families to come to them:

- Preschools: information provided to attending families prior to Kindergarten and elementary school enrollment
- Housing: information provided to tenants and renters in a similar manner by real estate agents to homeowners
- Advocacy Groups: information provided to diverse populations through trusted, established relationships in the community

Additional personnel. The role of counselors, family advocates, Communities in Schools site coordinators, as well as teachers and staff, with existing relationships with families is critical to families' support, yet not all schools have these positions, or enough of them. Furthermore, they are often laden with other responsibilities; staff workloads should be managed to include time dedicated to counseling families through the search process, particularly during the period of enrollment.

Improved protocol. An established protocol for information dissemination, including clear communication and requirements about timelines, applications, and other pertinent details would help ensure schools and personnel can properly plan counseling sessions and workshops. In particular, communication among public sectors (charters and CMS schools) to streamline the process would greatly help educators, counselors, and

parents alike. A common application for public charter, magnet, and TPSs is one way to simplify a single aspect of the choice process (Hawn Nelson et al., 2016).

Targeting students. Recognizing that students are leading many schooling decisions, efforts to disseminate knowledge specifically to them, perhaps through a school fair during school hours or a teacher workday, could provide improved access to information and discussions with representatives from a variety of schools. Furthermore, events and structures could facilitate the collaboration or shared knowledge among students (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014).

Future Research

While this study offers significant insight into understanding Latinx families' schooling decisions, it raises additional inquiries related to broad topics of the educational opportunities afforded Latinx students, differences in choice sectors, and family engagement in schools. Continued research that delves into the particularities of Mecklenburg County would further explicate the experiences, trends, and impact in the local setting. At the same time, findings have prompted the need to consider and compare Latinx families' behaviors and decisions across different contexts and policies. Because of the dearth of studies examining the Latinx perspective and the complications associated with investigating this vulnerable population, the following proposals only scratch the surface in forming a more comprehensive understanding of their schooling experiences.

Expanding the Study

Though the current study attempted to draw participation of Latinxs across the county and from a variety of backgrounds, an expanded study that is more representative

of residents in various sectors of the community and feeder patterns of schools would elicit a more complete picture of the population's engagement with choice. Additionally, a study with a comparative focus, examining participation across social classes and ethnicities, would help expose similarities or differences that would help draw conclusions related to the influential factors and mechanisms at work in Mecklenburg County. Expanding the study in a different direction—towards other counties and jurisdictions—would enable comparisons of various choice structures and policies, particularly in areas where Latinxs have shown higher representation in choice schools. Finally, alternative research methods—expanding the study quantitatively—could provide more specific demographic data of those enrolled at magnet schools, attending charters, and using Opportunity Scholarship vouchers across the state.

Exploring Trends

This study revealed distinct trends that should be explored across different counties and contexts in North Carolina and the country. Is this increased engagement in choice schools at the middle and high school levels consistent? Are Latinx families less engaged in school choice at the elementary level because of contentment or lack of knowledge? Findings also called attention to students leading these schooling decisions; additional insight is needed regarding their characteristics and behaviors, particularly in analyzing differences in students performing above or below grade level. Finally, in regards to trends in proliferating sectors of choice, the lack of diversity in charter schools is concerning and case studies of those achieving a balance of economic and racial representation should be presented to promote more equitable enrollment practices. While the magnet sector was more successful in supporting Latinx families, further

studies of students' experiences would detail the educational opportunity afforded them there; given previous research of the potential for within-school segregation at magnets (Davis, 2013), this issue should be explored, especially with this district's use of partial magnet programs at TPSs.

Longitudinal Impact

Research is also needed to better understand the long-term impact of choice policies on Latinx students' educational careers and life trajectories. A longitudinal study following the participants of this current project could detail the effects of their school decisions and describe more specifically the educational opportunity provided them through the choice process. Because revisions to the district's student assignment plan were slated to take effect over the next two years, a longitudinal study could also examine the influence of such boundary changes on student outcomes and families' perceptions of their TPS. Lastly, given the district's intentional marketing strategies to increase representation of LEP students in magnet programs, and its recent implementation of a weighted lottery in the application process, research evaluating the effectiveness and impact of such changes could provide valuable insight for current and future magnet programs and policies.

Moving Forward

As districts, municipalities, states, and countries across the world grapple with educational reform policies, policymakers must ensure that equity is at the forefront of the conversation and marginalized communities—often the one in most need of educational support—receive the services they deserve. This study makes important contributions by illuminating the contradictions of market-based policies derived on

normative theoretical assumptions that ignore the influences of diverse students' cultural backgrounds and social experiences. Further, it deepens our understanding of Latinx families' schooling decisions and of the mechanisms that restrict their participation in the school choice process. It connects issues of housing, transportation, and federal immigration policies to the already known family, socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic factors associated with opportunities and desires for choice. Finally, shortcomings of the local education agency's implementation of choice policies are highlighted in this dissertation. Thus, moving forward this study could be helpful for guiding existing and future policies to address the educational needs of historically underserved populations such as Latinxs and to promote systems and practices that strengthen, rather than contradict, the democratic ideals of our country.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: *Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Your story will help us understand how Latinos choose schools in Mecklenburg County. We hope to inform school leaders of ways they can better serve the Latino community and offer our children the high quality education they deserve. Before we begin, let me tell you a little bit about myself. As you know, I am currently a study at UNCC, studying to receive my PhD and become a professor to teach future teachers (I hope). Before that, I taught at Pinewood Elementary here in Charlotte for 9 years. While there, I got to know a lot of my students' families and organized many Latino Family Nights and activities in the neighborhoods to help support parents. My Master's is in TESOL and I spent a summer in Guadalajara, Mexico, living with a family and studying the school system there. Before that, I lived in Argentina and taught English at a bilingual school. I have visited Uruguay, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic to learn the language and culture of the people in each area. I have been so touched by the generosity and kindness I received while visiting those places that I wish to extend the same warmth, welcome, and support to Latinos living here in Charlotte. As you know, I have one young son named Casey, so I can empathize with you in your role as a parent. I come from a big Catholic family—I'm one of seven children and my son is the 16th grandchild! I greatly appreciate you allowing me to come into your own home and tell me about your family and experiences. Before we begin, please allow me a few minutes to explain the study and read the consent form:*

Interview Questions

A. Interviewee Background

Now I think we are ready to begin! First, please tell me a little about your family.
Probe for the following if not mentioned:
a. How many people are in your immediate family? What are their ages?
b. Do you all live together? Do you have other family living in the area?
c. From what country did your family come? How long have you been in the United States?
d. What language do you speak with your children a) at home, b) outside the home, and c) how would you describe your English ability?

And now tell me how you chose to live here in this neighborhood. OR
Tell me about where you live now, your barrio. Why did you choose this particular neighborhood?
Probe for the following:

a. What is your opinion of the neighborhood? Where else did you consider living? What influenced your decision to live here?
b. Do you know many neighbors? Who are your neighbors on this street? Do they have children who go to your child's school?

c. Are you hoping to move or are you satisfied with where you are? What is good about it? What is bad?

Let's talk a little about your own education. What was that like?
Probe for the following:
a. Where were you educated? (country, urban/rural, public/private) What were the schools like?
b. How many years did you go to school? What did you go to high school/technical school/graduate school for?
c. Do you want your child to have more or less education than you? Why?

That leads us into another topic—work. Do you work? Would you please tell me about your job?.
Probe for the following:
a. How did you get your job? Do you use your education on your job? How so?
b. Do you like the people do you work with? Are you friends with any of your coworkers?
c. What about your spouse? Does he/she have a job?
d. Who takes care of the children? OR Who watched the children when they were little?

B. Children's Education

And now that we're talking about your children, let's begin to talk about schools. In your opinion, what makes an ideal school?

CMS now offers parents many choices for schools. Do you know much about those options?

What schools do your children attend?

Tell me about how you selected this school.
Probe for the following:
a. Who took responsibility for making this decision?
b. Did anyone help you make the decision? Who? How did they help?
c. How do you know them? (i.e. family, friends, neighbors, church, organizations, other social networks)
d. What kind of information did they provide?
e. What other information did you have about the school before enrolling your child? Where did you get that information?
a. Did you use any print materials or information from the school? (flyers/pamphlets)
b. Did you see anything in the media (television, newspaper, radio, social) that informed your decision?
f. Did you visit the school before enrolling your child? Tell me about that experience. What was influential (good or bad)?

Tell me about your other options. Were there other schools you were considering? What was most important in choosing the school that you did?
Probe for the following:
a. Academics – ESL? Special education services?
b. location/transportation/convenience
c. safety
d. school environment/demographics
e. friends/family members there
f. knew teachers there
g. were there any factors you were trying to avoid? As in, too many anglos/gringos??

C. Evaluating School Choice Process

Are you pleased with your child's school? Why or why not?
a. Are you likely to remain at that school until your child finishes/graduates?
b. Would you like to switch schools if you could?
c. Could you tell me 2 of the best things about your child's school? 2 of the worst?

Would you say this decision/process easy or difficult? In what ways?
Probe for the following:
a. What particular aspects or resources made it easy? What particular challenges made it difficult? (i.e. knowing options, accessing information, social networks, advising, socioeconomic constraints like time, transportation, support)
b. In your opinion, what could be done to improve the process? What would be helpful for Latino parents? (from school or community resources)
c. How does this compare to your family's previous experiences in education or with schools, either in the United States or elsewhere?

D. Closing Thoughts

What do you feel is your role as a parent in the education of your child? What do you think are the most important responsibilities/things you can do?

Do you feel your child has access to a good education that will help him/her later in life? Do you feel your school cares for your child?

Are there any other thoughts that have come up since talking that you would like to tell me?

Finally, are there any other friends who you think would want to talk to me about this topic? If so, could you share their name and telephone number with me?

Thank you so much for your time and talking about this topic with me! You have my contact information—please call me if there is anything else you'd like to discuss, or if

you change your mind or your child decides to attend another school. I will be calling you once I have this interview transcribed so that I can confirm with you it represents exactly what we talked about. I wish you and your family the best of luck this school year and the years to come!

	Interviews	Documents	Observations
RQ 1: How do Latinx families in Mecklenburg County navigate school choice options and select a school for their child's education?	Latinx Families Counselor Parent Advocate Community in Schools Site Coordinators	School Report Cards School Websites & Maps CMS Choice Website (magnets) CMS Diversity & Achievement Data Magnet School Reports (diversity, waitlists) School Board Minutes & Presentations Pupil Assignment Plan Media targeting Latinos (Las Noticias, advertisements, etc.)	Countywide School Fair (BB&T Ballpark) Countywide School Fair (South Regional Library) Magnet Middle School Open House TP Middle School Open House TP Elementary School Support Session
RQ 2: How do these decision-making processes vary within the Latinx community?	Latinx Families Counselor Parent Advocate Community in Schools Site Coordinators	School Report Cards School Websites & Maps CMS Choice Website (magnets) Media targeting Latinos (Las Noticias, advertisements, etc.)	Magnet Middle School Open House TP Middle School Open House TP Elementary School Support Session
RQ 3: Does school choice advance greater access to high-quality education for Latinx families in Mecklenburg County? If so, how? If not, why?	Latinx Families Counselor Parent Advocate Community in Schools Site Coordinators	Zip code demographics (race, income) School Report Cards School Websites & Maps Non-public school data (home school & private enrollment) Opportunity Scholarship data CMS Choice Website (magnets) CMS Diversity & Achievement Data Websites with School Ratings School Board Minutes & Presentations Pupil Assignment Plan Media targeting Latinos (Las Noticias, advertisements, etc.)	Countywide School Fair (BB&T Ballpark) Countywide School Fair (South Regional Library) Magnet Middle School Open House TP Middle School Open House TP Elementary School Support Session