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by

Rian Kelly Carkhum

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**The Dissertation Committee for Rian Kelly Carkhum Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:**

**COMPLICATING CHOICE:  
NUANCED PORTRAYALS OF PARENTAL CHOICE DECISIONS**

**Committee:**

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Jennifer Jellison-Holme, Supervisor

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Richard Reddick

---

Victor Saenz

---

Mark Gooden

---

Melissa Martinez

**COMPLICATING CHOICE:  
NUANCED PORTRAYALS OF PARENTAL CHOICE DECISIONS**

**by**

**Rian Kelly Carkhum, B.S.; M.Ed.**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Bonnie G. Moore (1955-2011). There is no way that I would be the woman that I am today without her guidance and her unconditional love. You showed me the value of hard work, dedication, and faith. Your prayers and sacrifice were not in vain. Words cannot express how honored I am and how grateful I am to have had you as a mother. You were one of the best. You've rooted for me since I was child and, although you are not here today, I know that I have made you proud. Thank you for being my biggest advocate and cheerleader. Every day I wake up and see things in me that remind me of you. For this, I am forever indebted to you.

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**Complicating Choice:  
Nuanced Portrayals Of Parental Choice Decisions**

Rian Kelly Carkhum, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Jennifer Jellison-Holme

School choice has become a policy solution for families and children attending persistently low performing schools for the past 40 years. Since 1960, choice programs have been expanded with the principal goal of providing opportunities to families and children to attend schools that better align with the families' educational goals. The prevalent school choice literature assumes parents to be rational actors and rigidly defines rational decision-making as parents choosing schools with higher academic outcomes, rather than remaining in their low performing neighborhood school. There are, however, parents who chose to keep their child(ren) in their low performing neighborhood school despite the availability of other options. This study sought to investigate the factors influencing parents to keep their children enrolled in low performing schools despite the availability of other school choice options. Structuration theory was used as the primary conceptual framework as it allows for consideration of individual agency and social and cultural experiences in shaping decisions. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with parents and staff members at a high school in Houston to investigate this phenomenon. Findings from the study reveal that parents were not passive bystanders in their child's education; all four parents had made unsuccessful attempts at school choice prior to enrolling their children in the target high school (HS1) and parents kept their children

enrolled at HS1 because they were satisfied with other programs at the school. There were, however, academic trade-offs that parents had to make as a result of the constrained set choices available in their community. Faced with relatively limited options as a result of their context, these parents became invested in the option they chose and then left it up to their children to succeed. School choice, therefore, requires parents to take responsibility for any failure. Since they chose a low performing school, parents and children became responsible for failed choice and the larger inequities were not interrogated by anyone. School choice, within of itself, offers little value to communities if the school choice options themselves are not meaningful.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

School choice has become a policy solution for families and children attending persistently low performing schools for the past 40 years (Brighthouse, 2000; Harris, 2002). Since 1960, intra- and inter-district choice policies, voucher programs, magnet programs, and charter schools have been expanded with the principal goal of providing opportunities to families and children to attend schools that better align with family educational goals. To those families and children assigned to persistently low performing schools, school choice has been offered as the avenue for escape (Holme, Carkhum, Snodgrass-Rangel, 2012).

As the number of choice opportunities have increased and choice programs expanded, the number of students participating in these programs has also increased, and the number of children attending their assigned neighborhood schools has declined. The percentage of students attending their assigned public school decreased from 80% to 73% between 1993 and 2007 (Grady, Beilick, & Aud, 2010). Changes in enrollment can also be observed among racial/ethnic groups. As of 2007, 74% of White students attend their assigned neighborhood schools while 69% and 76% of African American and Latino children attend their neighborhood schools, respectively (Grady, Beilick, & Aud, 2010).

Although the number of children participating in choice programs have increased, the data reveal that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend their assigned neighborhood school. Low socioeconomic status in this context is defined as children coming from families with an income at or below 100% of the poverty line. Families are considered near poor when annual household income is at or above 200% of the poverty line. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of all students who are considered poor and 78% of all students who are considered near poor attend their

assigned public schools, while only 70% of all non-poor students attend their neighborhood schools (Grady, Beilick, & Aud, 2010).

Choice policies are based on a number of assumptions. A primary rationale driving choice policies has been borrowed from economic theory, with an emphasis on the benefit of competitive markets (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Levin, 1991). Voucher programs, charter schools, and the choice provision under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are all aimed at spurring school improvement through competitive market pressures (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Henig, 1994; Hoxby, 2000; Levin, 1991; Wells, 1996). These deregulated policies assume that inserting competition into the education market, schools – specifically historically low performing schools – will be required to improve academically in order to attract and retain students (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2000, 2003). Should schools fail to successfully compete, then students and parents have several options to leave their low performing schools in search for better, higher performing schools. Under these market models, schools that fail to respond to competitive pressures will be faced with declining enrollment as well as declining funding and may even have to close their doors (Lubienski, 2007; Merrifield, 2001).

A secondary underlying assumption of the market-driven approach to school choice rests with assumptions about parents. Market models assume that parents are rational actors and will choose “better” schools for their children when presented with such school choice options. “Better” schools in this framework are those schools perceived to be of better academic quality to parents (Chubb & Moe, 1990). The theory of rationality is extended to those families whose children are assigned to persistently low performing schools. The literature assumes that these families would eagerly take advantage of the opportunity to leave persistently low performing schools for higher performing options. Should these families continue to send their children to the

neighborhood school, much of the school choice literature frames these families as poor market players or non-rational.

Despite the definitions of rational behavior in the school choice literature, over 70% of school children attend their assigned neighborhood school – despite the schools’ overall academic performance (Grady, Beilick, & Aud, 2010). Recent school performance data indicate 48% of all public schools did not meet adequately yearly progress (AYP) for the 2011 school year, with wide variations across states (Usher, 2012). Given that NCLB requires schools labeled “In Need of Improvement (INI)” to offer choice to students, it is clear many students are attending schools that are not meeting state level performance metrics despite the availability of choice options. The school choice literature, discussed in the second chapter, would frame these parents as poor market players. This proposal, however, seeks to extend the rigid framing of parents and families beyond the confounds of constructed rationality to investigate why parents chose to send their children to their assigned, low performing, neighborhood school despite the availability of higher performing options.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

While there are many theories about why non-choosers elect to remain in their neighborhood school, few researchers have empirically investigated these reasons. Instead, many have attributed non-choices to institutional and contextual barriers that prevent parents from choosing (Cookson & Sonali, 1997; Gastic & Coronado, 2011; Smith & Meier, 1995; Wells, 1996). These explanations, however, assume that parents demand higher performing options, but for various reasons are unable to access such schools. From this perspective, parents are still rational actors, and their inability to participate in the market is limited by external forces.

One example of such barriers can be found in the argument that non-choosers fail to participate in choice because there is not sufficient supply of higher performing schools to meet the demand of students in lower performing schools (Holme & Wells, 2009). Thus parents, in this view, simply lack access to the better performing schools they desire. Another explanation suggests that parents and students who are eligible to choose higher performing schools have limited access to information, or little information at all about which choices to make (Gastic & Coronado, 2011; Wells, 1996). Limitations in financial resources and limited access to transportation have also been identified as reasons why students choose to stay in their neighborhood schools (Cookson & Sonali, 1997; Smith & Meier, 1995).

A third explanation of why parents and children choose to remain in their low performing schools is that parents are non-rational actors. Under this assumption, families make choices based on non-academic information (i.e., proximity/convenience or other aspects of schools that matter little in terms of overall school improvement/market outcomes); families simply “don’t care” enough to choose, or these parents are content with the education being afforded to their children. This framing suggests that if the market fails or if there is low participation in the market, the consumer (in this case the family and/or student) is the one responsible for poor market outcomes (Gerwitz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). This conceptualization of parents does not consider the roles schools have in accepting or rejecting consumer participation (Henig, 1994).

Although research on choice may speculate reasons for non-choice, there has been little empirical evidence on the rationality (and non-rationality) of parent/guardian decision-making through examining why students elect to remain in their neighborhood schools. The current school choice research does not investigate why parents do not

choose or provide an understanding of how they make sense of their “non-choices.” Understanding why families choose, or do not choose, may shed light on the underlying assumptions of choice policy. That is, if such policies are premised on rational actors placing pressure on schools to improve through choice, understanding the seemingly “non-rational” nature of families’ non-choices is important to gauging the effectiveness of theories of action underlying school choice.

To further examine the competing explanations of choice, the proposed study seeks to move beyond traditional analyses of school choice and rationality by attempting to understand why parents enroll their child(ren) in their neighborhood schools despite the school’s low academic performance. This study will examine this phenomenon through portraiture and structuration theory as they provide tools to examine how social and cultural contexts interact with individual agency to shape decisions (Giddens, 1984; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The ultimate goal of this study is to add to the theory of choice and, more specifically, to provide a deeper understanding of the influence that social and cultural context and agency have on parental choice decisions.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine why students and families choose to stay in their low performing neighborhood schools despite the availability of other choice options. Moreover, this study seeks to determine if there are any social and cultural factors that aid in shaping parents/families secondary educational decisions. Structuration theory considers both social and cultural contexts as well as individual agency in decision-making (Giddens, 1984). In-depth interviews will be used as the primary methodological technique for this inquiry (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003).

## **Research Questions**

This research employed qualitative methodology as it best aligns with the proposed conceptual framework. Qualitative methodologies are primarily concerned with contextualizing, understanding, and interpreting; as such, these methodologies allow for a deeper understanding of educational choice decisions parents make for their children (Creswell, 2007). Snape and Spencer (2003) maintain that qualitative research is a “naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds” (p. 3). Through qualitative methods, researchers attempt to “make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2006, p. 1). In addition, as an interpretive approach, qualitative methodology allows for interaction between researcher and participant and, subsequently, allows participants to add their voice to answer or explain complex phenomena. As a qualitative methodological tool, portraiture allows the researcher to create a narrative magnifying the social and cultural contexts of the lived experiences of the study participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture, the researcher takes a more “active, engaged position in which one searches for the story, seeks it out, is central in its creation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As such, qualitative methodologies and, more specifically, portraiture align more closely with the research questions of the study. Through narratives the researcher has an opportunity to create deeper understandings of the role social and cultural context play when parents make school choice decisions. The following research questions will guide this study on parental school choice decisions:

1. Why do parents, despite the availability of choice options enroll their children in low-performing neighborhood schools in an urban district context?
2. What factors do African American parents/guardians in a large urban district consider when enrolling their child(ren) into the neighborhood school?



3. Are African American parents/guardians in a large urban district aware of choice options available? Why do they elect not to utilize those options?

To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007) with four parents or guardians, one high school counselor, and one Assistant Principal from a historically low performing high school (as measured by yearly state standardized test scores) that was in close proximity to other high performing options.

Although the study resulted in a smaller sample size than initially proposed, the interviews resulted in extraordinarily rich data that provide great insight into the factors that guide the educational decisions parents make for their children. Leveraging portraiture as the primary tool for inquiry also creates an intimate understanding of school choice decisions and, in some ways, expounds on the conventional wisdom surrounding the inherent assumptions of school choice and the (ir)rationality of parents.

#### **SIGNIFICANCE**

This study is timely as the role of school choice, particularly the future of charter schools, continues to be the focus of federal- and state-level conversations on school improvement and student achievement (Center on Education Policy, 2011). In 2010 several states proposed legislation to lift previously state-imposed caps on charter schools. Voucher programs have also become a part of the state and federal dialogue on school reform (Center on Education Policy, 2011). Although there has been no mounting evidence for the success of voucher programs, Congress has continued funding to the contentious Washington D.C. voucher program (Samuels, 2011). Despite push back from teacher organizations, Indiana has also launched its voucher program with nearly 4,000 available spaces (Center on Education Policy, 2011).

Despite this expansion in choice policies there has been relatively little literature that has explored the choices of the “non-choosers”; such a study is important because

understanding the motivations, perspectives, and opinions of the parents and families – who by theoretical and practical definitions of choice have not engaged in choice – may help shed light on the potential of market models to improve schooling for the lowest performing schools. Although the students from low-income backgrounds are opting in to choice options, there are still a great number of students who attend their neighborhood schools. It is imperative that continued effort be made to provide access to high quality education for all students, even if they elect to attend their neighborhood schools. Second, there is a growing urgency to improve academic outcomes for students across the country as a matter for the economic future of our country. In such a time of urgency, and with limited resources, it is imperative that ideas of competition and school choice are not perpetuated without consideration of the other factors that may contribute to a student remaining in their neighborhood school.

Ultimately this study will add to the body of literature through this proposed inquiry in three ways. While using qualitative methodologies may limit the scalability of the findings, the voices of these families about why they remain in their neighborhood schools may shed light on the assumptions that underlie choice policies and guide future discussions on school choice. This study also intends to contribute to the school choice research literature by engaging families that have been, to date, largely left out of the empirical literature. Moreover, this study seeks to redefine the narrative in the existing research literature about those families who choose to remain in their neighborhood school, despite having alternative education opportunities. Through this work I hope to extend the conversation and deepen the understanding about school choice beyond constructed ideas of what rational behavior and rational choice “look” like and add to the literature a more complex yet compelling picture of the factors that drive educational decisions.

In the following two chapters, I outline the literature, framework, and methods for the study. Chapter 2 presents the literature on school choice, specifically literature on the competitive market and equity assumptions surrounding school choice, with an emphasis on the way parents are framed in the literature that supports both assumptions. Chapter 2 also presents an overview of the conceptual frameworks used to guide the proposed study. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological tools used in this study to investigate the research questions presented in the introductory chapter. Next, Chapter 4 presents the findings from this study. Finally, Chapter 5 revisits the findings in light of assumptions of school choice and concludes with recommendations for policy and future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

School choice has been a major issue in American public education since the 1960s (Harris 2002). Alternative schools, magnet schools, open enrollment choice programs (inter and intra-district), vouchers, and charter schools have all been mechanisms by which the federal, state, and local governments have sought to provide solutions to low academic performance in public schools. Guided by principals of market theory, advocates believe that offering choice in public education will spur improvement in public education while simultaneously creating opportunities for educational equality for students, who, without choice options, would be trapped in low-performing neighborhood schools (Viteritti, 2010)

Currently a wide array of market-based reforms have been adopted by state legislatures, including charter school laws (in 40 states and the District of Columbia), inter-district open enrollment laws (in 37 states), tuition tax credit laws (in six states) and school voucher laws (in four municipalities, two states, and the District of Columbia) (Center on Education Policy, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011; Welner, 2008) The federal government also evidenced its faith in market models with the adoption of NCLB in 2001, which requires failing schools to offer choice to students (Holme, Carkhum, & Snodgrass-Rangel, 2012).

Choice advocates and detractors champion these implicit and explicit theories of action when debating the effectiveness of choice. This review of the literature examines both the market and equity theories that undergird school choice, specifically how choosers and non-choosers are framed within these theories. While most research literature does not specifically frame choosers and non-choosers in any clear way,

inherent in each theory, however, are guiding beliefs or expectations about behavior for choosers and, therefore, non-choosers.

Opinions about the role of public school choice in school improvement and reform run the gamut in the academic and public policy communities. Although opinions may differ, the crux of the arguments rests on two central assumptions. The first assumption is that competition via school choice increases effectiveness of schools (as measured by student achievement). That is, competing for students should force traditional public schools to implement strategies spurring academic improvement to retain and attract students. The second core assumption centers on educational equity. School choice advocates argue that by providing choice, parents and students who would otherwise be required to attend their low performing schools have opportunities to attend higher performing or “better” schools. For students trapped in their low performing schools, choice provides an avenue for escape.

This review of the literature seeks to explore school choice, equity, and the framing of rationality within market models of education in four major sections. The first section examines the underlying assumptions of market theory, the way parents are framed under the market theory assumption, and the current research that supports or challenges the market assumption. The second section examines the equity argument of choice, focusing first on the way parents are framed in the equity argument for choice and second on the research evidence about the relationship between choice and equity. The third section examines the nuances and complexities of choice that do not fit neatly into the rationale of the market or equity arguments. The final section examines the available literature on parents and students who do not engage in school choice options but seek to remain in their neighborhood school, despite the school’s academic situation. As shall be illustrated below, the education choice market does not operate as neatly as theorists

prescribe. The education market is more complex than advocates suggest and non-academic factors are integral in shaping the school choice decisions.

### **MARKET THEORY: UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS AND THEORY OF ACTION**

For three decades, one major school of thought on school choice has been connected to free market ideas inherent in economic theory. That is, the foundation of many school choice policies rest on the assumption that competition (via choice) will require public schools to compete for and retain students (Friedman, 1962). Should schools fail to complete or lose enough market shares (students), then the school will be forced to close (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Viteritti, 2010). The theory presupposes that schools will respond to competition and to the demand for higher quality schools by increasing effectiveness (student academic outcomes), productivity (doing more with less), and parental satisfaction in an effort to attract parents and families to their schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2000; Levin, 1991).

The most forceful articulation of the competitive theory of choice was by Chubb and Moe (1990), who in their book *Politics, Markets and America's Public Schools*, claim that school choice breaks up the monopoly of public education:

What we propose is a new system of public education that eliminates most political and bureaucratic control over the schools and relies instead on indirect control through markets and choice...the freer schools are from external control the more likely they are the have effective organizations. (p. 5)

Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that choice will enable students to become consumers of education, giving students the freedom to select a school that would best benefit them. Choice, from their perspective, is the only way to spur improvement in public education; any other types of reform (i.e., curriculum reform or school reconstitution) will ultimately be unsuccessful because these reforms do not incentivize schools to compete for students.

Other voices support Chubb and Moe, each advocating for school choice as a vehicle to spur school improvement through market pressure and competition (Chakrabarti, 2008; Friedman, 1962; Grongberg, Jansen, & Taylor, 2012; Hoxby, 2004; Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005; Johnson & Kafer, 2002; Levin, 1991).

### **How Parents are Framed in Market Theory**

A central foundation of market theory is that consumers are rational actors (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1991), and the framing of consumers in the school choice market is no different. Indeed, implicit in the market theories of choice is that parents, as consumers, are rational actors. Such theories presume that, presented with the appropriate information about school performance and about the choice process itself, parents will inevitably select schools that are higher performing (as measured by standardized assessments) than their home schools (Merrifield, 2001). For those parents and students who chose to stay in their neighborhood school, despite the availability and accessibility of information about a school's academic performance, or alternative choice options that exist, the theory of rationality would argue that such a decision is non-rational.

The narrow classification of parents and students as either rational or non-rational does not account for the other extraneous factors that may influence a students' decision to remain in their neighborhood schools. There is a continued acceptance of a singular conceptualization of rationality, which is transferring from a low performing school to a high performing school (as measured by test scores), while the factors that influence decisions of parents and students who remain in their neighborhood schools fall under the auspices of non-rational behavior. Furthermore, the notion that parents who choose are rational, and therefore "good" choosers, while those who do not choose are framed as "poor" market players, does not consider the context by which parents make decisions

and what external influences may shape their decisions not to engage in the choice market (Reay & Ball, 1997). As I will illustrate below, the research literature has focused largely on examining the assumption of rationality within market models and evaluating the extent to which market models lead to improved academic outcomes.

***Are Parents Rational and Do Rational Choices Lead to Improvement?***

Existing research has focused largely on evaluating a number of aspects of the market-based models of choice and the assumptions of the “rational” choosers. Researchers have examined whether parents’ choice decisions are indeed “rational” by examining the factors that shape those decisions (Hamilton & Guinn, 2006; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Nicols & Ozek, 2010; Reback, 2008). Researchers have also examined whether competition leads to improved academic outcomes, i.e., increased effectiveness (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Bradley, Johnes, & Millington, 2001; Hoxby, 2000; Ledwith, 2010; Okpala, Bell, & Tuprah, 2007), and increased levels of productivity, i.e., increasing student enrollment and student achievement while keeping costs low (Gronberg, Jansen, & Taylor, 2012; Hoxby, 2000; Hoxby, 2003; Hoxby, 2004). Parental satisfaction, as more nuanced, outcome of choice, has also been evaluated in the research literature tied to rationality (Barrett, 2003; Buckley & Schnieder, 2006; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Paul, Metcalf, & Legan, 2005; Thompson, 2003). Although parental satisfaction is not included in the theory of action guiding school choice, increased levels of satisfaction are assumed and expected when parents and children are given opportunities to select the schools of their choice. I present the relevant research on each facet – rationality, academic outcomes, productivity, and satisfaction – below.



### *Rational Actors*

Much of the literature on choice appears to examine the behaviors of parents who participate in choice – which inherently connects ideas of rationality and rational behavior to parental choice decisions (Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Nicols & Ozek, 2010; Reback, 2008). This literature, therefore, focuses on factors parents use to make choices, examining whether they are indeed “rational”; i.e., whether or not they are based on academic factors or other factors. Some of this research has found that parents are making choices of higher performing schools. Reback (2008), for example, finds an increase in parental demand to enroll their children in schools in higher performing school districts. Similarly, Nichols and Ozek (2010) found that 63% of their sample chose to send their children to out-of-boundary public schools or charter schools with higher average standardized test scores than their in-boundary assigned school. Hastings, Kane, and Staiger (2006) observed high levels of parental demand for high performing schools in Charlotte, particularly at the elementary school level. The findings align with the theory of rationality presented in choice – parents want to send their children to higher performing schools when such options are made available (Farrie, 2008; Hastings, Kane & Staiger, 2006; Hastings & Weinstein, 2007; Nichols & Ozek, 2010; Reback, 2008).

To the extent that decisions are not rational, a number of researchers have argued it is because parents lack credible or accurate information about their neighborhood school’s performance (Bell, 2009; Hastings, Weelden, & Weinstein 2007; Hastings & Weinstein, 2007; Levin, 1991; Lubienski, 2007). Researchers contend that when families are not provided with an adequate amount of information about the availability of other choice options, then they cannot successfully participate in the market. The failure to make this information available or accessible only complicates participation in the

education market for parents, particularly those from the most vulnerable populations. The absence of information available to parents and families about the types school choice (including processes for participation) has been cited as a primary reason for the low levels of participation in choice (Fusarelli, 2007; Holme & Wells, 2008).

Indeed, Levin (1991) argues that in order for a market to operate at maximum efficiency, information around choice options is critical:

The competitive efficiency of market systems of choice depends crucially upon the knowledge of alternatives. In fact, the perfectly competitive market assumes the existence of perfect knowledge of all pertinent information for making efficient decisions on the part of both potential consumers and producers. (p. 143)

Hastings and Weinstein (2007) similarly observed when parents from disadvantaged communities are provided clearer information about school academic performance, they are more inclined to choose higher performing schools when provided the opportunity to do so. Other researchers have found that it is not a lack of information but a shortage of high performing options that limits participation in choice. In areas where the demand for choice may be high, particularly in communities saturated with schools identified as low performing, researchers suggest the supply of choice options may be limited or not available to all who want to participate (Reback, 2008; Rosenbloom, 2010).

The literature appears to support the idea that parents are rational actors and tests the rationality presumption by examining “choosers.” Rationality, in the context of choice and in-line with market-based constructs, would define rational behavior as selecting higher performing school options when such options are available. Research does not consider parents who chose to retain their children in their neighborhood schools, despite information about choice and availability of higher performing options. The lack of direct or explicit evaluation of non-choosers may lead to assumptions about non-choosing parents and their children: parents who do not chose higher performing

options despite being provided with adequate information could be considered non-rational.

### *Academic Outcomes and Effectiveness*

Rational choices are intended to lead to overall improvement in academic outcomes as a result of competition, and a large body of the research literature on choice examines the extent to which this is the case. The existing research on the effect of school choice on academic outcomes yields mixed results, though. Effectiveness, in the traditional public school context, is often defined as improvements in student achievement as measured by test scores or another metric related to student success such as graduation rates and/or drop out rates (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002; Hastings, Weedlen, & Weinstein, 2007; Holme, Carkhum & Snodgrass, 2012; Lauen, 2009). Research on choice suggests that when competition increases via choice, there are observed improvements in some areas of student academic outcomes (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, teacher quality, and school expenditures) (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Bradley, Johnes, & Millington, 2001; Hoxby, 2000; Ledwith, 2010; Okpala, Bell, & Tuprah, 2007).

The findings of this body of literature tend to vary depending on the choice option being evaluated. The literature suggests that public schools respond differently according to the type of competition they face for students. Whether it is competition from other public schools (facilitated by open enrollment choice programs), charter schools, vouchers, or magnet programs, the theory of action would expect that public schools would have to improve academically in order to compete for students. The literature, however, does not overwhelming support claims that choice will lead to improved public schools.

In the case of open enrollment choice programs, research reveals small gains in student achievement at traditional public schools when it faces competition from other

public schools via open enrollment choice programs (Betebenner, Howe, & Foster, 2005; Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2005). These studies reveal that the improvements observed in public schools may be linked to the demographic make-up of the current student population. That is, schools that have students with more capital may be in a position to compete with other schools. For example Hastings, Kane, and Staiger (2006) found that schools with students with higher level of educational capital (parent education level) are in a better position to successfully compete with other public schools when choice is introduced.

The research evidence is also mixed when evaluating the impact on public school effectiveness when faced with competition from private schools. For example, Goldhaber (1999) found that academic outcomes did not increase at traditional public schools when it faced competition from private schools. Other researchers have found, however, that test scores at traditional public schools increased when faced with competition from nearby private schools (Figlio, Hart, & Metzger, 2010; Hoxby, 2003).

Research also suggests that public schools respond with increased test scores when faced with competition from charter schools (Brasington, 2007; Holmes, DeSimone & Rupp, 2003; Hoxby, 2003). However, Bettinger (2005) as well as Buddin and Zimmer (2005) observed no gains in student achievement at traditional public schools when faced with competition from charter schools. The same is true for research on vouchers. Some research (e.g., Chakrabarti, 2008; Hoxby, 2003) suggests that student achievement increases at traditional public schools when schools are confronted with competition from voucher programs, while other studies (e.g., Howell, Peterson, Wolfe, & Campbell, 2006; Wolfe et. al, 2009) find no improvement in public school achievement as a result of competition from voucher schools.

When faced with competition in magnet schools, Archbald and Kaplan (2004) observed higher average performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in districts with magnet schools and no attendance zone requirements than in those districts with attendance zone school requirements and no magnet schools (Archbald & Kaplan, 2004). In addition, analysis of National Educational Longitudinal Data reveal that students in inner-city magnet schools performed better on tenth grade assessments than their peers in comprehensive public schools (Gamoran, 1996). The increases in test scores were only found in social studies and reading, though, not in math and science.

No consistent answer emerges from the research literature on how competition has impacted student achievement in traditional public schools. What can be explicated from the aforementioned research is even when gains have been observed, neither have they been significant across all subjects nor have they provided insight into any shifts in the behavior of schools to achieve such outcomes. Rather, these studies look at competition alone as the sole force for driving improvement. In addition to increases in student achievement, competition should also result in increases in productivity – schools spending less while improving academic outcomes. The next section examines the impact of choice on productivity.

### *Productivity*

Advocates for choice maintain competition in school choice will result in schools being more productive with resources, both human and financial (Hoxby, 2000; Hoxby, 2002). That is, when opportunities for competition are created in choice, schools will maximize resources to increase academic achievement or lose students to schools who are increasing student achievement while maximizing resources. Assumptions about productivity support the rational framing that exists in current literature. When parents

signal (through choice) a focus on academic achievement for their children and are allowed to choose, it prompts schools to reduce waste and focus on instruction and/or implement strategies that result in increased test scores. The catalyst for improvement is the threat or actual loss of student enrollment. Any resulting improvement in public schools is attributed to choice and market pressure (Hoxby, 2002). Thus the assumption of rationality is built into this model.

In the case of productivity, some argue choice provides a “win-win” scenario for families. If a family chooses a more productive school, the student(s) may benefit from increased levels of academic achievement and, if a school can implement measures to increase academic achievement while simultaneously maximizing resources, then the students remaining in the school also benefit from increased productivity. Put more broadly: “school productivity could be the rising tide that lifted all boats” (Hoxby, 2003, p. 288).

One of the most common means researchers use to evaluate productivity and choice is to evaluate academic outcomes and costs. For example, Hoxby (2000) found that high levels of residential choice lead to an increase in public school academic achievement while lowering spending. Similarly, Chakrabarti (2008) found that when private sectarian schools were allowed to participate in the Milwaukee voucher program, per pupil revenues decreased for public schools (by about 4.7% or 29.5 million dollars) and average scores on reading and language arts tests increased at these public schools. Findings from this study suggest increases in productivity at district public schools as a result of school choice.

Charter schools provide another layer of comparison when measuring productivity as an outcome of school choice. Some reports have found that charters have increased or achieved similar outputs in achievement as traditional public schools but at

lower costs (Gronberg, Jansen, & Taylor, 2012; Hoxby, 2003). However, others have pointed out that many charter schools receive allocated resources from local, state, and federal governments, suggesting the capacity for charter schools and charter management organizations to raise additional resources surpasses that of a traditional public school (Baker & Ferris, 2011; Baker, Libby, & Wiley, 2012; Miron & Urshel, 2010). In this regard, charter schools represent a situation where there are more public dollars per student than in traditional public schools. In sum, consistent findings on the effects of school choice on productivity do not emerge from the research literature. In studies where increased levels of productivity were observed, studies did not identify other extraneous factors that may have led to increases in productivity.

### *Satisfaction*

In addition to student achievement and productivity, there is a growing body of research that explores parent and student choice satisfaction with their choice options. It is important to note that although satisfaction is not addressed in the theory of action of choice, it is an expected outcome of parents having more options in selecting schools. Thus, one goal of market models of choice is not necessarily related to efficiency or productivity but rather having a better match to parent preferences (Barrett, 2003; Buckley & Schnieder, 2006; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Paul, Metcalf, & Legan, 2005; Thompson, 2003). For example, a student who is an aspiring singer may report high levels of satisfaction with a school that consistently wins choir competitions, or an aspiring engineer may report higher levels of satisfaction with a school that has a competitive robotics program. Advocates of market models would assume that the market is operating efficiently if more parents and students report higher levels of satisfaction with their schools because of special programs – or programs that are of particular interest to the parent or student.

Although this satisfaction measure can speak to the nuanced (non-academic) factors considered in making a school choice, the literature does not seem to measure satisfaction with neighborhood schools before choosing another option but rather compares levels of satisfaction between parents with children enrolled in public schools and parents with children enrolled in other types of schools. For example, Paul, Metcalf, and Legan (2005) observed that parents who actively chose public schools consistently reported lower levels of satisfaction than parents with students in private schools or parents in charter schools.

Barrett (2003) similarly found that students found greater levels of satisfaction with their charter schools compared to their previous public schools. The largest predictor of higher comparative satisfaction ratings for students was their perceptions of their learning environment and the quality of their teachers at their charter schools. For parents and families choosing private schools, Goldring and Phillips (2008) found that parental satisfaction with their child's previous school was not a predictor of private school enrollment, but rather, opportunities for parental involvement was a large predictor in transferring to a private school.

What these studies have in common is that they measure levels of satisfaction for students currently enrolled in their choice options. None of the studies highlighted above measure parent or student satisfaction of their neighborhood public school or why any satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with their public schools keeps them and their children enrolled in their neighborhood schools. What is more, none of the measures of satisfaction in the studies identify academic achievement as a reason for satisfaction; rather, higher academic performance was attributed to higher levels of satisfaction (see Barrett, 2003).



In sum, despite the inconsistency in the outcomes of school choice and traditional public schools' response to competition, advocates continue to support choice. Not all supporters of choice subscribe solely to the belief that with increases in competition, quality will also improve. Some supporters of choice believe that with increased options to choose, students of color and students who are from low-income backgrounds will have a greater access to higher quality academic options. The equity assumption inherent in choice is discussed next.

### **CHOICE AND EQUITY: UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS & THEORY OF ACTION**

The second, more complex argument in the school choice debate is that choice creates more opportunity for educational equity (Cookson, 1994; Hastings & Weinstein, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2001; Lubienski, 2005; Viteritti, 1999a). This equity argument advances the idea that choice removes barriers for poor students and students of color who, because of attendance zones, have been bound to their low-performing neighborhood schools. In effect, school choice provides an escape for children trapped in chronically underperforming schools (Boaz, 1991; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Hasting & Weinstein, 2007; Holmes, DeSimone, & Rupp, 2003; Levin, 1991; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996, Walberg, 2007). The equity side of the choice argument, as it is often called, essentially targets low-income and/or students of color and often shares wide support as a viable policy solution for these particular student populations (Boaz, 1991; Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Hasting & Weinstein, 2007; Holmes, DeSimone, & Rupp, 2003; Levin, 1991; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Walberg, 2007).

### **How Parents are Framed in the Equity Debate**

As with the market theory on choice, parents' decisions are not explicitly deconstructed in the literature as it relates to issues of equity. The literature implicitly

assumes that when parents (especially parents from low-income communities) are offered options to choose, they will choose to send their children to better performing schools (as measured by test score performance). Framed as an opportunity for access, policymakers and researchers alike contend that choice will offer students a way out of their low-performing neighborhood schools. In addition to the individual benefits, school choice may offer even greater public benefits. Joseph Viteritti (1999b) says,

...much can be learned from the rich experience that we have had with various forms of school choice. There is encouraging evidence to suggest that, if properly constructed by policymakers, school choice can function to upgrade the educational opportunities of all children, and in the process, that it can strengthen the health of American democracy. (p. 3)

Political figures, policy makers, and researchers often key in on the opportunity choice has to “liberate” disadvantaged families from the trappings of persistently low-performing schools. In fact, much of the language around choice from the elected officials, political figures, and advocacy organizations creates a sense of urgency and a call to action to create more choice for the most vulnerable populations. For instance, Condoleezza Rice spoke on school choice at the 2012 Republican National Convention and said, “...And we need to give parents greater choice, particularly poor parents whose kids, very often minorities, are trapped in failing neighborhood schools. This is the civil rights issue of our day” (Republican National Convention, 2012). Choice advocates also use “emancipatory” language to garner support from the very communities they seek to support. As Ron Miller wrote in a brief in 2010,

It should anger black Americans that, for decades, government at all levels has denied black parents and their children the opportunity to pursue a quality education at the school of their choice... Generations of young black people are condemned to lives of desperation and hopelessness through the failure of our school system. (para. 1)

Rice and Miller provide examples from popular and specialized policy realms of the rhetoric employed to attach ideas of equity to school choice.

### **The Great Equalizer: Can School Choice Promote Equity?**

This section explores the degree to which the research on school choice supports the claims that choice options create opportunities for equity. The research in this area primarily focuses on who chooses and the academic implications of such choices. That is, when presented with opportunities to choose, when do parents take advantage of choice options, particularly low-income families? And, what are the academic outcomes for families who take advantage of such choice options? All major forms of choice have addressed opportunities for equity and each is addressed below.

Similar to research on market theory, research on equity and choice frame parents as rational actors. The research seeks to examine (a) whether parents in low-performing (i.e., low income and disadvantaged) contexts, given choices of higher-performing (i.e., more affluent, privileged contexts) schools, actually do and are able to take advantage of those options and (b) what the academic outcomes are of students who transfer from low to higher performing schools. I discuss each in turn below.

#### ***Higher Performing Options***

The equity argument would contend that, when presented with higher performing options, parents – particularly parents in low-income communities – would flock to higher-performing options (Hastings & Weinstein, 2007). The idea is that choice will “liberate” students from their low performing schools and, by creating opportunities to select higher performance options, parents and children from disadvantaged communities are afforded the opportunity to escape their persistently low-performing schools. As previously mentioned, choice research rarely measures why parents and families chose

other choice options directly. Instead, the literature in this area appears to consider parental demand for higher-performing options (with particular emphasis on parents in low-income communities) as a proxy for equity. Charter schools and voucher programs are particularly highlighted in this area of research. Waiting lists for various charter schools and voucher programs demonstrate the growing demand for the opportunity to participate in these types of programs. The Florida Corporate Tax Scholarship Program and the Ohio voucher programs are two examples of programs with an increase in applications from low-income families (Richards, 2010; Solochek, 2012), and The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2013) reports an estimated 610,000 students were on waiting lists for public charter schools in 2012.

Charter schools are particularly highlighted in the literature for serving large populations of inner city, low-income students (Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Lewis & Danzig 2010; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). When parents engage in choice, they are more likely to select charter schools. Data reveal charter school enrollment is roughly 2% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010), but over 50% of the students choosing to attend charter schools are African American and Latino, and 50% of all charter school enrollees are classified as being “poor” or “near poor” (NCES, 2010). With the higher percentages of students of color and low-income students, charter schools appear to support the equity argument with one caveat: although enrollment in charter schools support the idea that choice creates opportunities for the neediest students to leave their neighborhood schools, the research also suggests that charter schools maintain highly segregated campus environments with most students being primarily African American and/or low income (Booker, Zimmer, & Buddin, 2005; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Renzulli & Evans, 2005).

Voucher programs are best known for targeting families with children trapped in their low-performing public schools. In fact many voucher programs have income restrictions that prioritize participation for low-income students, including Ohio, New York, Minnesota, Milwaukee, Washington D.C., and Florida (Hanauer, 2002; Figlio, Hart, & Metzger, 2010; Johnson & Kafer, 2002). For example, the Florida Tax Credit Voucher program reserves spaces for students and families with incomes below 185% of the poverty line (Figlio, Hart, & Metzger, 2010). In addition, Hanauer (2002) observed significant increases in students served by the Cleveland voucher program since its beginnings in 1996, with over 4,200 students participating in the program as of 2001. Over 50% of the students participating in the program are African American and from low-income backgrounds (Hanauer, 2002).

Even within these means tested choice programs, however, there are disparities in access. Indeed, while choice is intended to liberate the most disadvantaged students who are “trapped” in low-performing schools, there is a growing body of evidence that parents who choose are from relatively more advantaged backgrounds and are able to engage more fully in various choice policies (i.e., parents who are relatively more informed, able to transport their children, and whose kids have few behavioral issues and/or can abide by behavior contracts). Evidence supports the idea that choice privileges the relatively more affluent and/or the well-informed, well-connected students to leave neighborhood schools, thereby leaving the most vulnerable students concentrated in neighborhood schools (Holme, 2002; Lee, Croninger & Smith, 1996; Lubienski, 2005; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996; Saporito, 2003; Saporito & Sohoni, 2006; Wells, 1996). From this viewpoint, choice leads not to opportunity for the students who need it most, but to more isolation of poor students and students of color (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Cullen, Jacob & Levitt, 2006; Frankenberg, Seigel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008;

Goyette, 2008; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Howe, Eisenhart & Betebenner, 2001; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1994; Parker & Margonis, 1996; Wells, 1996).

Research on other choice options suggest that the most disadvantaged students do not overwhelmingly take advantage of school choice. Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt (2006) found that students who participated in the school lottery system in Chicago were less likely to be African American, male, or poor. Research magnet and open enrollment programs reveal students from families with higher average household incomes and higher levels of capital are more likely to participate in choice programs (Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Holme, 2002; Holme & Richards, 2009; Lewis & Danzig 2010; Reback, 2008; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Thus, low-income students and students of color remain in persistently low performing schools.

Choice advocates maintain the position that when given the opportunity to choose, parents will select higher-performing academic options. While findings from the literature suggest that families who choose do prefer higher-performing options, the research presents another variable for consideration. The majority of the market share remains with families who have the resources needed to participate in the education marketplace.

### *Academic Outcomes*

Beyond examining whether disadvantaged families take advantage of choice, other research has examined the outcomes of the students who choose. The second layer of the equity argument is that students will benefit from increased improvement in their individual academic performance (as measured by test scores) as a result of choosing a higher performing school. Findings in this area appear to be mixed. Some researchers

(e.g., Archbald & Kaplan, 2004; Hoxby, 2004; Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005; Ledwith, 2010; Lauen, 2009; Gronberg & Jansen, 2001; Sass, 2006) find that academic achievement does, in fact, increase for the student who chooses, regardless of socioeconomic status. A majority of the research (see Archbald, 2004; Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2006; Lee, Maddaus, Coladarci, & Donaldson, 1999; Ozek, 2009; Zimmer et. al, 2003), however, argues that, despite attending schools where aggregate student achievement may be higher, choosers do not necessarily experience major improvements in their individual academic performance. Furthermore, findings on the effect of choice and academic outcomes depend on the type of choice option being evaluated, with open enrollment choice, charter schools, magnet programs, and voucher programs (private schools) yielding different results.

The effect of open enrollment choice on student academic outcomes also yields mixed results (Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006; Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau 2009; Ozek, 2009). Whereas some studies observe academic improvements after participating in open enrollment choice from open enrollment choice options (Ledwith, 2010; Okpala, Bell, & Tuprah, 2007), others find no positive academic gains as result of choice. For example, Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt (2006) observe no significant long-term positive effects on academic outcomes for students after they choice out of their assigned school. In fact, the findings suggest that lottery winners perform worse in some content areas at higher performing schools than their peers. Similarly, Ozek's (2009) work on open enrollment in a Florida school district showed lower average reading scores for students who chose to attend a higher-performing school than those who remained in their neighborhood schools.

In contrast, Ledwith (2010) studied differences based on race/ethnicity. Ledwith's findings indicate that African American and Latino students who attended schools

outside their attendance zones scored significantly higher on standardized exams than their White peers who also attended schools outside of their attendance zones. Asian and Latino students who attended schools outside of their attendance zones also scored significantly higher than Asian and Latino students who were enrolled in schools in their respective attendance zones.

The effect of charter school enrollment on academic performance remains of particular interest to policy makers and researchers. As federal- and state-level policies advocate the removal of charter school caps, there is growing interest in the academic outcomes of students who attend charter schools. As with much of the research on choice, findings on the effects of attending charter schools are mixed. It is particularly challenging to find the overall consensus on the effect of charter schools on achievement due to methodological differences. Some studies aggregate outcomes using student data at the national level (Hoxby, 2004), state level (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Hanushek et. al, 2006; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Zimmer et al., 2003; Gronberg & Jansen, 2001) or the district level (Zimmer & Buddin, 2006; Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005).

According to Hoxby (2004), students enrolled in charter schools are more likely to be more proficient in reading and math than children in the nearest traditional public school and even more likely to perform better than peers at the nearest traditional public school with the same racial/ethnic composition. Although overall results reveal that students in traditional public schools and students in charter schools score roughly the same on standardized tests, Hoxby and Rockoff (2005) reveal that when disaggregated by grade level, students enrolled in charter schools score significantly higher on the Iowa Basic Skills Test (IBST) in grades K-5 than similar peers in traditional public schools. However, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) report that students enrolled in schools in North



Carolina score (on average) lower on reading and mathematic tests in grades 3-8 than their peers in traditional public schools. In California, charter school performance depends on several factors (Zimmer et. al, 2003). For example, students in start-up, non-classroom based charter schools tend to perform better on the Stanford 9 than those students in traditional public schools. However, when all charter schools are compared to traditional public schools, students enrolled in charter schools at the secondary level perform slightly lower on the Stanford 9 than students in comparable traditional public schools.

Magnet schools and choice-based integration policies aim for greater equity via access for students of color and students from low-income communities (Betts et al., 2005; Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009). Despite the consideration of access for these vulnerable student populations, findings on academic achievement seem a bit more consistent than any other choice option. Overall, research reveals that students who attend magnet programs have higher average standardized test scores than those who remain in traditional public schools (Betts et al., 2005; Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009; Chavez & Frankenberg, 2009; Gamoran, 1996; Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010).

Similarly, Gamoran (1996) found that students who attended magnet schools had higher standardized reading, social studies, and science scores than those students who attended private schools or traditional public schools. Some studies suggest, however, that attending magnet schools does not necessarily lead to increases in achievement. For example, Archbald and Kaplan (2004) found that districts with magnet schools as a choice opportunity for students did not report significantly higher NAEP scores than those districts that did not have magnet programs. Blank and Archbald (1992) attribute the different findings in magnet program studies to methodological inconsistencies. Many of the studies involving magnet programs did not control for demographic characteristics,

which may skew findings. However, for studies that do control for background characteristics, Blank and Archbald (1992) observe higher academic outcomes for students who attend magnet schools/programs.

Primarily attributed to the market position on choice, vouchers have also maintained the dual charge of creating access to higher-performing schools for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cowen, 2010; Figlio, Hart, & Metzger, 2010; Campbell, West, & Peterson, 2005). The research on vouchers and academic achievement yield inconsistent results (Center on Education Policy, 2011; Lubienski, Weitzel & Lubienski, 2009). Some of the literature appears to support the claim that participation in a voucher program leads to increases in student achievement, particularly for African American students (Forster, 2011; Johnson & Kafer, 2002). However, other studies on vouchers observe minimal (if any) gains in academic achievement outcomes for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds who use vouchers. Wolfe and associates (2009) found no significant improvement in reading or math scores for students participating in the D.C. Voucher program who came from public schools labeled “in need of improvement.” Howell, Peterson, Wolfe, and Campbell (2006) observed mean achievement gains for African American students (compared to their public school peers) who used vouchers to attend private schools in New York, Ohio, and D.C. However, the researchers observed no differences in achievement for any other ethnic group.

In sum, the research on the idea that choice increases educational opportunities for students who would be otherwise trapped in their neighborhood schools yields mixed results. These inconsistent findings should be of no surprise as the full scope of choice – including those peripheral factors that influence a family’s decision about their educational choices – cannot be comprehensively evaluated or included in any analysis of

choice. Although research does not explore each factor that influences the educational choices, it can provide a deeper exploration of the factors that complicate choice and move it from what choice theory would maintain to be a simple and rational process to one that includes the nuance and complexities in parental decisions. The next and final section of this review explores such complexities.

### **RESEARCH ON NON-CHOOSERS IN MARKET THEORY**

Taken as a whole, the focus in the research literature is on families and students that choose. This lack of consideration for non-choosers in the research supports the market assumptions of rational behavior. That is, the research literature accepts as truth that a family “choosing out” of a low performing neighborhood school is the only behavior that is rational. Hastings and Weinstein (2007) best explain the rationale of choice and the inherent assumptions about parental behavior:

The goal of these choice plans is to increase academic outcomes for disadvantaged students by allowing them to attend higher-performing schools and by creating pressure on failing schools to improve through the threat of losing students, implicitly assuming that parents select schools for academics when offered the opportunity to do so. (p. 2)

Courtney Bell (2009) offers a more nuanced portrayal of non-choosers in her study on choice sets. Findings from her study suggest families did not choose schools outside of their customary enrollment pattern because their options were not significantly better than the schools that they currently attended. Other reasons cited for parents not searching for new schools included: parents’ trust of the schools in the current feeder pattern, previous experience with other children and the schools in the pattern, and the reputation of the school in the pattern (Bell, 2009).

Other research suggests that parental involvement and educational goals are lower for non-choosers. Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer, and Perna (1995) explore the differences

between choosing and non-choosing low-income Latino families in Texas. Across all demographic variables (including parental education levels and family income), all family value variables (including material goals versus education and educational expectations), and all parental involvement variables they find non-choosers are statistically significant from choosers. The researchers conclude that choosers place higher value on educational goals and are less concerned with material outcomes such as income. Choosers also report higher educational expectations for their children than non-choosers.

Still other researchers are concerned with the “students left behind.” These researchers explore the differences between the non-choosers’ and the choosers’ schools but do not consider why parents might elect to remain in their assigned school. For example, using data from North Carolina, Bifulco, Ladd, and Ross (2009) find that non-choosers have lower standardized test scores and come from families where parents have less than a high school diploma than their peers who choose. In Milwaukee, Cowen, Fleming, Witte, and Wolfe (2012) found that African American students who performed poorly on standardized tests and their private school abandoned the city’s robust voucher program to attend public school. Non-choosers are, therefore, more likely to have homogeneous educational environments with poor educational outcomes and low levels of capital.

#### **NUANCED PORTRAYALS OF PARENTS**

Although market theory assumes that parents are rational actors and presented with the appropriate information, other researchers speak to the complexity in parents making choices. While these researchers do not challenge the idea of rationality directly, they provide another framework to consider how parents and families make choice.

Indeed, some researchers acknowledge that families do not make decisions in a vacuum and other factors are at play: “Decision making is a socially charged activity: choices are not made merely on the basis of individual tastes. Rather preferences are shaped by social factors” (Saporito & Lareau, 1999, p. 418). These factors may include racial/ethnic preferences of both student and teacher compositions (Farrie, 2008; Saporito & Lareau, 1999), perceptions of school quality (Dougherty et al., 2009; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Holme, 2002), religious preferences (Hess & Leal, 2001) parental concerns with safety (Betebenner, Howe, & Foster, 2005), reputation, availability/access to transportation (Falbo, Glover, Holcombe, & Stokes, 2005), and the existence of cultural and social connections (Lewis & Danzig, 2010; Wells, 1993). It is these other factors that add layers of complexity in understanding parent decision-making and school choice. The extraneous factors are not accounted for in the conceptualization of school choice in market theory.

School demographic preferences may factor into the decision making process for parents in addition to a prospective schools’ overall academic performance. For example, researchers find White parents evaluate a school demographic composition before considering other factors and do not prefer schools with large percentages of African American students, even if the schools with larger percentages of White students have lower average test scores and safety concerns (Farrie, 2008; Saporito & Laureau, 1999). African American families prefer to send their children to schools where fewer students qualify for free or reduced priced lunch (Saporito & Laureau, 1999). Dougherty and colleagues (2009) also found that racial composition, compared to average test scores, was more influential in shaping a family’s decision to purchase a home. Over time, the researchers observed that racial composition “had become seven times more influential

than tests [scores],” in the willingness of families to purchase a home and, consequently, in choosing which school to send their child(ren) (Dougherty et al., p. 542).

These demographic preferences are not just reserved for public school choices. Saporito and Sohoni (2006) found that when private schools were in the attendance boundary of a neighborhood, White students are less likely to be enrolled in their neighborhood public school and more likely to be enrolled in those private schools. Private school demand may be considered a proxy for capital as private schools may require fees for tuition and/or fees that provide access to families who can afford to pay absent any financial aid opportunities. In this regard, demand for private schools by White families suggests demographic composition of a school is a priority for some families in the choice market.

Perceptions of school quality has also been linked to families choosing out of their neighborhood schools. In one study, Holme (2002) found that families would determine schools in their neighborhood were low quality and would make the decision to purchase homes in another, more suburban community because of perceptions that the schools in these new neighborhoods would be higher performing. Less than one percent of the parents who had moved to a new neighborhood because of dissatisfaction with their previous neighborhood schools had even visited the neighborhood school they perceived to be low quality. In fact, 80% of the families had no empirical evidence (e.g., test score data) that the neighborhood school they were leaving was actually low performing. Moreover, less than 25% of the parents in the study had actually gone to the school in their new neighborhoods. Much of the information parents gathered about their previous neighborhood schools were from individuals in their respective social networks.

Status, in fact, dominated every aspect of these parents’ choices (Holme, 2002). They not only implicitly trusted the information given to them by other high-status

parents but also read a great deal into these parents' own school choices. As such, the parents in this study assumed that those schools serving the children of high-status parents — whether neighborhood schools or private schools — were superior to those serving the children of lower-status parents (Holme, 2002, p. 180).

Findings from much of the literature on choice support the notion that choice is not simply about rational behavior but is also about individual preferences that extend beyond the types of activities or program offered by schools. Choice also may be deeply connected to social and cultural preferences and goals parents have for their children including, but not limited to, schools that reflect demographic preferences for schools and families. “Decision-making is a socially charged activity; choices are not made merely on the basis of individual taste. Rather, preferences are shaped by social factors, including one’s own racial background” (Saporito & Laureau, 1999, p .418).

Some research suggests that racial bias plays a role and that racial background and racial composition of schools tends to be a driving force for families in the selection of schools. Hess and Leal (2001) find that race and desegregation efforts are highly correlated with private school enrollment in the 50 large urban districts. The more a district engages in desegregation efforts, the higher the private school enrollment tends to be in those districts. There were small correlational relationships observed between race and private school enrollment. African American student enrollment in the district is positively correlated with private school enrollment for white students. Latino student enrollment, however, is negatively correlated with private school enrollment for white students.

Some studies have found that choice is about cultural consonance: for example, one study found that African American parents were more likely to enroll their children in predominantly African American charter schools (>95%) because they feel more

comfortable with a large number of African American faculty (Lewis & Danzig, 2010). Some of the parents in this study believed that “African American teachers could understand their children a special way, a way that they were not sure that White teachers could” (Lewis & Danzig, 2010, p. 216). Wells (1996) also observed that comfortability with school environment was a major preference for African American parents and children. Findings from her study suggest that African American students return to their neighborhood schools after choosing to leave because of feelings of uncomfortability or not feeling welcomed at their new schools.

These findings from these studies introduce a layer of complexity in understanding parental decision-making and challenges defining decision-making within the bounds of rationality and rational choice. The literature above highlights that school choice involves consideration of several preferences of which academic achievement is one of many. A larger critique of the market theory and equity argument of choice is that the theory is standardized on middle class White norms and then applied to the decision making of all parents regardless of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Reay and Ball (1997) argue that choice, and therefore market theory, inherently adopts middle class norms and the experiences of low-income families can go largely ignored. Since the experiences of low-income families are not considered in the theory, neither do they fit into the constructs of rationality, their decisions, or the factors that shape such decisions are considered non-rational. As Reay and Ball (1997) write,

Issues that are significant for many working-class parents are marginalised choice debates...In research on school choice, working class choices are typically evacuated of any meaning in their own terms, and are routinely represented through the values of others. One consequence of this is the identification of middle-class parents with rational, carefully considered choice-making and working class parents with inadequate, ill considered choices or “leaving it up to the child.” Assumptions which take middle-class experiences to be normative



discursively construct working-class parents as ill informed and less or inappropriately involved in their children's education. (p. 91)

There are assumptions about school choice and its ability to spur improvement in the education marketplace and provide opportunities for educational equality, especially for children assigned to persistently low performing schools. Embedded in both theories of action is the assumption that parents are rational actors. These theories go on to construct rational behavior as a parent choosing to send their child(ren) to higher performing schools when those options are made available through school choice.

#### **SUMMARY**

This examination of the literature reveals no consistent findings in the market or equity assumptions of choice. Improvements in academic outcomes, productivity, and parental satisfaction as a result of school choice do not appear to be overwhelmingly supported by the research. The literature also provides no consistent or overwhelming evidence that choice provides an escape for children assigned to persistently low performing schools. One thing is clear across the research: parents are consistently assumed to be rational actors, and rational behavior is defined as choosing higher-performing educational options if they are made available. This definition of rational decision-making is expected for all parents, especially for parents with children attending low-performing schools.

There is evidence that suggests that engaging and not engaging in choice extends beyond a schools' academic performance. Non-academic factors such as perceptions of school quality, religious preferences and school/neighborhood demographic preferences may factor into parental decision making for choosing or not choosing. These findings illustrate that the education choice market does not operate as neatly as theorists prescribe (Holme, 2002; Lewis & Danzig, 2010; Saporito & Laureau, 1999; Wells, 2006 .

Furthermore, choice is more complex and extends beyond the generally accepted definitions of rational choice focusing only on selecting higher-performing schools when those options are made available. Expanding on the understanding of rational behavior as it relates to school choice to include these non-academic factors may be particularly helpful as it concerns families who elect to remain in their low performing neighborhood school despite opportunities to attend higher-performing options. Although the decision to stay may be described as non-rational by the literature, a study of non-choosers warrants merit and requires additional evaluation.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To explain the notion of rationality in the educational choice context, it is helpful to understand the origins of this framework. This idea of rational behavior in choice has origins in rational choice theory (RCT). According to McDonald (2003), the rationality assumption within RCT presumes that individuals make decisions to satisfy three criteria: utility maximization, consistent preferences, and purposive action (McDonald, 2003). That is, before making a decision, an individual weighs the costs and benefits associated with each possible option (purposive action and consistent preferences) and ultimately chooses the option that has the greatest benefit(s) and the lowest cost (consistent preferences and utility maximization). Applied to the school choice literature, parents are framed rational actors and, therefore, upon learning about higher performing educational options parents, specifically with children who attend persistently low performing schools, would choose to send their children to these higher performing options. Would then, rational choice theorists suggest that the parents who enroll their children in their persistently low performing neighborhood schools are non-rational or poor -market players?

Theorists attempt to address such complexities through additional exploration and analysis of RCT. These additional layers in RCT supplement the basic assumptions of rational choice theory, particularly utility maximization; however, these perspectives maintain that the factors that influence and shape decision making may warrant additional attention (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997; Sen, 1993). For example, Hechter and Kanazawa (1997) argue that RCT does consider how individual motivations shape decisions. The authors argue that RCT is not one theory but rather a set of theories each adding variance and understanding to rational choice models. They then categorize these frameworks as either “thin” or “thick” models of choice (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997, p. 194). According to Hechter and Kanazawa, “thick” models of choice decisions are made, in part, with a particular level of intentionality and people have reasons that underlie each decision. As such, “thick” models consider motivation via evaluating existing beliefs and values. Unique to “thick” models is the idea that individuals can value non-exchangeable goods such as the joy one has for playing a particular sport or listening to a particular type of music. This value that one places on these non-exchangeable preferences may have greater influence on decision making than any other priority (i.e., test scores or other “objective” indicators of quality). Sen (1993) argues that the internal consistency one engages in making choices could not exist without one establishing some hierarchy of values and beliefs or norms that, in effect, drive individual choices and ultimately internal consistency.

Despite these additional contributions to rational choice theory the theoretical framework still falls short in its acknowledgement of constructed choice. For example, the motivations for two individuals may be similar, yet the school choice decisions made may be different. The attempt of rational choice theorists to explore the role values, beliefs, and norms have in decision-making does not address the role (if any) that social

and cultural context plays in shaping decisions. Structuration theory, however, provides an opportunity to examine the relationships between individual agency and social structures (Giddens, 1984).

### **Structuration Theory**

Structuration theory is a framework that helps to understand how individual decisions relate to the local contexts in which individuals are embedded. Anthony Giddens (1984) in his seminal work *The Constitution of Society: Outline the Theory of Structuration* lays the groundwork for the theory. In structuration theory, space and time are paramount:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time.  
(p. 2)

In this conception, space and time refer to the construction of how and when individuals interact with their social worlds.

A second foundation to structuration theory is individual agency: “Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). In this framing individual agency also implies power. Power in this framework means that the individual at any given point in the course of action could act differently than their initial intent, which will directly impact the outcome of the course of action. In structuration theory, therefore, agency is concerned not only with intentions but also with the capability that people have to choose or not to choose (Giddens, 1984).

According to structuration theory, actors make decisions in their social worlds (Giddens, 1984; Shilling, 1992). These social contexts are developed and governed by

structures. Structures are “rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized feature of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space” (Giddens, 1984, xxvix). In other words, structures are the social rules influencing our actions. In turn, our actions only reinforce these social rules. The recursive relationship between structure and actions is also hallmark to structuration theory.

Structuration theory also maintains that structure has the ability to restrict, or enable, individual actions (Giddens, 1984, Shilling, 1992; Turner, 1986). In structuration theory this concept is known as the duality of structure. In decision-making, structuration theory holds that the structures individuals employ to make decisions may in effect restrict or limit their choices and thereby limit their agency (LeTendre, 1996; Okano, 1995). LeTendre (1996) found that, despite the rigorous academic requirements in the high school selection process, middle school placement counselors in Japan have the ability to provide information about school choices as well as define the sets of schools for students. Although the decisions made by middle school families appears to be rational *prima facie*, the options available for the families to select from were constructed by those placement counselors. Similarly, Okano (1995) found that students’ employment options were restricted based upon school, government, and employer decisions that limited the scope of options for a student to decide from.

In one key study directly relevant to this study, Valdez (2008) uses structuration theory as the guiding conceptual framework to explore post-secondary decision-making among Latino immigrant high school students. In his study, he explored why the students that he studied, who held college aspirations, made the seemingly “non-rational” decision not to attend college. Valdez found that despite academic preparation and individual desires to attend colleges and universities distant from their hometown, students faced

informational, structural, and cultural constraints. Structural constraints included participants' lack of knowledge of the "rules" of the college decision process. Cultural constraints included were identified as the "forces that shape their daily lives" (p. 846). For the students in this particular study, those cultural constraints appeared to be commitment to family and the needs of her family. In this way, structuration theory helped to understand and contextualize these students' seemingly irrational, or illogical, decisions not to attend college.

For the purposes of the study, structuration theory offers a balanced theoretical framework given the extant literature on school choice. As the school choice research demonstrates, although parents have agency in making individual school decisions, the social and cultural contexts or structures in which these parents leverage their agency may actually impact, limit, or buffer such decisions. Instead of evaluating parental choice decisions as either being rational or non-rational, as the research literature would suggest, structuration theory provides a lens to explore decisions holistically, which may challenge notions of rational choice in the current framing of parents' school choice decisions.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

As previously mentioned, this study is interested in the factors that shape parental educational decisions for their children. More specifically, this study explores the ways in which social and cultural factors interact with individual agency to impact such decisions. Currently, the prevalent framework in school choice literature assumes parents to be rational actors and rigidly defines rational decision-making to one outcome. Structuration theory is used as the primary conceptual framework as it allows for consideration of individual agency as well as social and cultural experiences in shaping decisions. Through structuration theory, parental decisions are considered beyond the boundaries of prescribed rationality constructed by the research literature. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to add to the body of school choice literature by using the voices of parents who, despite various options to choose out of their neighborhood school, still decide to enroll their children in their assigned schools.

As such, the following research questions will guide this study on parental school choice decisions:

1. Why do parents, despite the availability of choice options enroll their children in low-performing neighborhood schools?
2. What factors do African American parents/guardians in a large urban district consider when enrolling their child(ren) into the neighborhood school?
3. Are African American parents/guardians in a large urban district aware of choice options available? Why do they elect not to utilize those options?

This study engaged qualitative methodology, which is primarily concerned with providing deeper insight or understanding into a particular issue. Snape and Spencer (2003) maintain that qualitative research is a “naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds” (p. 3). Through qualitative

methods, researchers attempt to “make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2006, p. 1). As an interpretive approach, qualitative methodology allows for interaction between researcher and participant and allows the participant to add her/his voice to answer or explain complex phenomena. As such, qualitative methodology aligns more closely with the principal objectives of this study. Furthermore, qualitative methodologies appear to be the best methodological approach to exploring the role that social and cultural context may have on parents when making school choice decisions.

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the methodology and research design proposed to study how parents make educational choice decisions, particularly in the larger context of school choice. The next section of this chapter will discuss qualitative methods as a methodological framework followed by a discussion of the research design and the strategies used for data analysis. This chapter will conclude with sections on reliability, validity, and generalizability.

## **QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY**

For the purposes of this study, qualitative methodology is the most appropriate methodological tool to explore the educational choice decisions of families. According to Creswell (2007; 2009) qualitative methodology seeks to find similarities or common meaning in the experiences of several individuals who encounter the same phenomena. As Glesne puts it, “Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in their particular social-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions” (2006, p. 5) As such, qualitative studies are charged with describing rather than explaining (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Creswell, 2007). This study explores



school choice as the phenomena and seeks to describe why parents enroll their children in their low-performing neighborhood schools despite the availability of higher performing school choice options. Qualitative methodology allows parents to describe their lived experiences and give voice how their social and cultural experiences may have shaped such experiences.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

There are various techniques that can be utilized to share qualitative findings, and all are important to qualitative inquiry. For the purposes of this study, however, portraiture will be used as the primary methodological tool. Portraiture, unlike other forms of qualitative methodologies, marries the science of inquiry with artistic expression and empowers the researcher to use evidence of interviews and their own field observations to create narratives, or portraits, of the lived experiences of study participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture the researcher takes a more “active, engaged position in which one searches for the story, seeks it out, is central in its creation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.12).

Unlike other forms of qualitative inquiry that pushes the researcher to relentlessly pursue objectivity, portraiture requires that the researcher insert herself in the inquiry process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Hackmann 2002). As the premiere thought leader on portraiture Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) provides a roadmap for the role of the researcher:

With portraiture, the person of the researcher – even when vigorously controlled – is more evident than in any other research form. She is seen not only in defining the focus and the field of inquiry, but also in navigating the relationships with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing emergent themes, and in creating the narrative. At each one of these stages, the self of the portraiture emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights. (p.13)

Although portraiture requires the researcher to be “present” in crafting the narrative, portraiture neither omits the researcher’s responsibility to identify her predispositions or biases nor allows the researcher to void any consideration of the disciplined skepticism and scrutiny that is critical to conducting rigorous research. The researcher, however, must be intentional in highlighting the lived experiences of the research participants without advancing the researcher’s agenda (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Hackmann, 2002).

To counteract potential bias, and perhaps a hallmark to portraiture methodology, is the emphasis the researcher must take on what is good, or goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In searching for what might be good, the researcher should first identify what is good or positive about the context. With the complexities that exist in lived experiences of people, there will be challenges and experiences that are not positive: “In examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course, be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness. In fact, the counterpoint and contradictions of strength and vulnerability, virtue and evil, are central to the expression of goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Therefore it is the evidence of positivity in the narrative that also illuminates the negativity, or vulnerability.

In addition to the confrontation of bias and the focus on goodness, another key aspect to portraiture is the role that the portraits play in shaping a greater understanding of the phenomena. That is, portraits should be shared with larger audiences to help shape more global understandings of phenomena. In fact, Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) would contend that the findings should be explicitly shared with audiences outside of the academy. As such, the portraits should be constructed so that those who are not intimately connected to the study or the research topic are able to make meaning from the findings. Although portraiture seeks to communicate to global audiences (e.g.,

researchers, administrators, policy-makers, and parents) there are a few challenges to traditional research expectations around generalizability and validity.

In all inquiry, the ability to generalize the study findings to other similarly situated research contexts is optimal. Typically the ability to generalize findings comes from a variety of factors, one being the number of research participants in the study (Creswell, 2007). In qualitative research, the role of generalizability is often debated due to the smaller sample sizes (Glesne, 2006). It is often argued that small sample sizes limit the researcher's ability to apply findings from one study to larger understandings of phenomena.

With portraiture, however, there are challenges to commonly understood notions of generalizability because small sample sizes enable the detail in which the data is analyzed and the unique details which create the narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Hackmann, 2002). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) share a different conception of generalizability. Since the goal of portraiture is to share the deep complexity of the lived experiences of study participants, the hope is that readers will identify themselves in the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) assert in portraiture that the researcher pursues smaller sample sizes to craft the narratives because she believes "that embedded in the reader will discover resonant universal themes. The more specific, the more subtle the description the more likely it is to evoke identification" (p. 14). The small sample sized used for this study best aligns to portraiture methodology and the objective of this study.

As the primary objective of this study is to better understand why parents, despite the availability of higher performing options, choose to enroll their children in low performing options, portraiture provides an opportunity to explore educational decisions

in-depth and in context, which may allow for a more holistic understanding of the phenomena.

Portraiture is a part of a larger set of qualitative methodological traditions that use the lived experiences of an individual or a set of individuals (Creswell, 2007; Hackmann, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Case study, narratives, ethnographies, and grounded theory are alternative qualitative methodological tools that could be used to in this study. Portraiture, however, was selected because it allows the researcher to directly connect with the lived experiences of participants. The portraits will allow for a more thoughtful understanding of the role that context and agency play in shaping parental educational decisions. Consistent with structuration theory, portraiture enables the researcher to understand the interaction between parents' lived experiences and histories, their local contexts, and the choices they make. Instead of viewing decisions as “wrong” or “irrational,” this study seeks to understand the choices from the perspective of parents.

### **Site Selection**

To identify parents to study, I sought to find parents who had enrolled their child in a low performing school, despite the fact that other options were available. My research site was selected using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1990; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). In purposive sampling, “units are chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study” (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003, p. 78).

To explore why parents enroll their children in low-performing schools, I sought to identify a school site that was, in fact, low performing at the time of the study. It is important to operationalize *low performing* in the context of this study (see Appendix A for definitions of key terms). Beginning with the 2012-2013 school year, the state

designated a school that did not meet state expectations on test scores, post-secondary achievement and/or dropout rates as “Improvement Required (IR).” After one year of earning the IR, schools must work with the district and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to determine sanctions and implement interventions by creating a campus improvement plan. After two or more consecutive years in “IR” status, schools could submit a turnaround plan to TEA and, at worse, could face school closure. Appendix B provides an explanation of the new accountability ratings.

In 2013 and beyond, a low performing school is one designated by the TEA as Academically Unacceptable (AU) or a school that does not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for two consecutive years. Secondary schools can receive AU rating for not meeting standardized testing targets and/or not meeting high school graduation targets (Texas Education Agency, 2012). According to the Texas Education Agency any public school that is AU, or fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years is identified for School Improvement. Sanctions associated with being in School Improvement (SI) status include school choice (first year of SI), supplemental educational services (second year of SI), corrective action (third year of SI), and restructuring (fourth year of SI). Most relevant to this study is that a school must offer intra-district choice to students in its first year of School Improvement (TEA, 2016). For a full explanation of the sanctions see Appendix B.

For my study, I sought to identify a low performing school within Houston Independent School District (HISD). According to the United States Department of Education, HISD has over 300 schools with over 200,000 students enrolled and is the seventh largest school district in the country and the largest in the state. HISD has 49,462 students enrolled in grades 9-12 across 44 high schools (NCES, 2011; Houston Independent School District [HISD], 2012b). The district also offers a robust set of

school choice options that include intra-district choice, magnet programs, and 23 district-operated charter schools.

For the purposes of this study, a high school is the most appropriate research site as more choice options are available at the high school level. For example, magnet programs are more widely available to families and many of the charter schools in the district focus on grades 9-12 (HISD, 2012b). It is important for this study that school choice options actually be available for these students. As such, targeting grade levels where school choices are made available is most appropriate.

In 2015 the state of Texas submitted a request to the U.S. Department of Education to waive certain provisions of No Child Left Behind for the 2015-2016 school year. Most important in that waiver request is that Texas schools no longer receive the rating of “met Adequately Year Progress (AYP).” Without this designation, Texas schools, particularly HISD schools will no longer have to offer school choice based on AYP designation. Students who are currently in a school of choice will be able to remain in that school through the highest grade served at the school (HISD, 2016).

Houston ISD has separated the lowest 15% of performing schools into two tiers – priority and focus schools. Priority schools are Title 1 schools in the district that have a graduation rate of less than 60% and/or have the lowest reading and/or math achievement in the district. Focus schools are those schools that have the widest gaps between math and reading performance by federal subgroup. Priority and focus schools are federal sanctions of which school choice is a part. The primary target high school, HS1, is listed as a focus school for the 2015-2016 school year (HISD, 2016).

According to TEA, the district rating for HISD for the 2014-2015 school year was “Met Standard” but, for its special education learners, the district was identified as “Needs Assistance.” Fifty-eight percent of schools, seven of which are high schools, were

identified as “Improvement Required.” The number of children served in the school district, along with the number of schools that are priority or focus schools, and thereby required to offer intra-district choice to students, make HISD an interesting site for this study.

The initial methodology for this study required the use of Texas Academic Performance Reports, the Texas Education Agency’s database to identify two schools that were are in (at least) the first year of IR. Two high schools would be selected as primary sites: one high school would be situated in a low performing cluster and the second in a higher performing cluster. The low-performing cluster included the primary target high school (HS1) along with other low-performing high school options in a five-mile radius to test the idea that parents are not choosing out of their low performing high schools simply because they have no higher performing options nearby. The high performing cluster included the target low performing high school (HS2) situated in a cluster with higher performing high school options in a five-mile radius to better understand why parents are not selecting higher performing options when such options are available. Identifying two schools situated in two performance clusters (cases) were intended to maximize the opportunity to investigate the proposed research questions.

After receiving approval from the district office, which required approval from each campus principal, I went to visit the sites. I was able to successfully meet with and interview parents and staff from HS1. HS2, however, was a difficult site to access. I was unable to successfully connect with anyone at HS2, even after phone calls and emails to the principal and visits to the campus. Due to the access challenges with HS2, I moved forward with collecting data only from the HS1.

HS1 is a public high school located on the Southeast side of Houston. Steeped with a rich history in a historical area of Houston, HS1 has an enrollment of 672 students,

with 85.6% of the students being African American and 12.5% of students being Latino (Texas Education Agency, 2012) The 2014-2015 state academic performance rating for HS1 is Improvement Required. HS1 is 4.4 miles away from another public high school (2015 state accountability performance rating: Improvement Required), and 1.5 miles away from a public charter high school (2015 state accountability performance rating: Met Standard).

Despite access challenges, the data that emerged from HS1 provided rich data to shape deeper understandings of school choice through the narratives of staff and parents at HS1. The narratives, constructed through the lens of portraiture, will be presented in the findings (Chapter 4). The next section of this chapter speaks specifically about the process by which participants were selected to participate in this study.

### **Participant Selection**

To identify participants, a purposive sampling technique was used (Patton, 1990; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). In purposive sampling, participants are “chosen because they have particular features or characteristics which enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes” (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003, p. 78). For the purposes of this study, staff and parents of children enrolled in HS1 were targeted for interviews.

I initially proposed to identify parents by speaking with parishioners at local churches and parents involved in local community organizations. In addition to speaking with parents at churches, I proposed to post flyers at target high schools and counselors would be asked to provide names and contact information of families who met the research objective of the proposed study. I did not have to execute on posting flyers and speaking with churches because I was able to successfully gather study participants



through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was the primary way I was able to successfully recruit study participants. The snowball, or network, sampling technique allows the researcher to connect with individuals who may know individuals who meet the proposed research objective. Participants were asked if they knew any other parents who have children currently enrolled in the neighborhood school (Glesne, 2006).

Through one of the counselors at HS1 I was able to connect with the program director for the College and Career Readiness afterschool program. Through the program director I was given the name of one parent who had children who were both enrolled at HS1 and an afterschool program. After my first parent interview, I asked the participant if they knew other parents who might be interested in the study. Through each parent I was able to get the name of another parent until I was able to call and interview all of the participants for this study.

In addition to access to participants, snowball sampling created an opportunity for rapport building with participants. By one interviewee connecting me to other parents I was able to quickly build rapport through trust that the parents had for one another. Rapport building is essential in qualitative methodologies (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Rapport in qualitative inquiry is a “distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher” (p. 110). The nature and timeline of this study did not allow for the time required to establish deep connections with the research participants. The researcher’s understanding of the district and HS1 context of the district along with the connections with participants through snowball sampling reduced any challenges with rapport (Glesne, 2006).

To the extent possible, parents from various racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds were sought as participants. In addition to race and income, parent gender and immigrant status were also considered when selecting interview participants.

Embedded in structuration theory is the notion that an individual's background and their life circumstances are instrumental in shaping their choices. As such, it is important to capture a diverse set of backgrounds that may allow for a broader understanding of the way agency interacts with social and cultural contexts to form decisions. The demographic make-up of HS1, with 86.3% of the student population identifying as African American, made identifying students who identified as other race/ethnicities challenging. Although race and ethnicity of the study participants was homogenous (all African American), there were other differences in the lived experiences, educational backgrounds, and family structures of study participants that contributed to a wealth of data for this study. The next section highlights the data collection process of this work.

### **Data Collection**

To address the research questions at HS1, four in-depth, face-to-face, interviews with parents who have at least one child enrolled at HS 1 and two in-depth, face-to face interviews were to be conducted with counselors and/or administrators at the target campus. Initially a total of six parent interviews and two administrator/counselor interviews were proposed for HS1 and HS2, respectively. Due to site accessibility challenges, coupled with the requirement for site approval by the district, it was not within reason to pursue a second site. Additionally, at HS1, where I was able to interview parents, accessibility was also limited, which reduced the number of participants from six to four. Although the sample size is smaller than initially proposed, the narratives or portraits constructed from the in-depth interviews provide insight into why parents elect to stay in their neighborhood school despite its academic performance.

In-depth interviews are designed to be flexible in nature; thus, a semi-structured protocol was used, which was open ended to allow for a more conversation-like interview

(Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). In-depth interviewing requires the researcher to remember the goals of the research including the themes they would like to explore and, in the case of this proposed study, the particular phenomena to be described (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). In addition to flexibility (with structure), in-depth interviews should also be interactive; “new” knowledge should be generated throughout the interview, and the interviewer should engage participants in the hope that responses hit three benchmarks: “penetration,” “exploration,” and “explanation” (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). While the interactive feature of in-depth interviews are inherent in the its conversational requirement, creating “new knowledge” and the three interview response benchmark require additional explanation. These concepts are discussed below.

Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003) maintain that in-depth interviews should be generative, “in the sense that new knowledge or thoughts are likely, at some stage, to be created” (p. 142). It is presumed that through in-depth interviews the participant, either by themselves or with guidance from the researcher, will explore new thoughts, feelings or emotions that have not been explored before. This “new knowledge” may lead both the researcher and the participant into a deeper level of conversation in the interview.

When engaging in in-depth interview or conversation, the interviewer should frame any follow-up questions in a way that gives the researcher a deeper understanding of what the participant means (penetration). The conversational format of an in-depth interview should also create opportunities for the researchers to ask follow-up questions that explore the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of the participant (exploration). Through exploration, researchers ultimately gather explanatory data (explanation) (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

Before the interviews, participants signed a consent form, and an unsigned copy of the consent form was provided to the participant for their personal records. The

consent form outlined the purpose of the study including how the data will be maintained and utilized. In addition, the researcher verbally communicated to each participant the purpose of the study and how data from the interview will be used. Participants also had an opportunity to ask the researcher any questions before the interview began. Participants were also notified via the consent form and verbally by the researcher that participation in the study was voluntary and should they feel uncomfortable at any point in the interview process they are free to leave the interview and all partial recordings will be immediately destroyed (Glesne, 2006; Lewis, 2003).

In addition to in-depth interviews, field notes were taken during interviews. These field notes made reference to participant body language, facial expressions, or other non-verbal communication, as they cannot be heard in interview playback. Field notes have traditionally been used as a method of data analysis in ethnographic research; however, they have become a useful tool in data analysis when in-depth interviews are the primary tool for data collection (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003). Field notes provide an opportunity for the research to capture things that cannot necessarily be audio recorded in an interview like body language or facial expressions.

To ensure confidentiality and privacy, all interviews were conducted in a private, enclosed space, or a space of the parent's choosing. I interviewed both HS1 staff in their offices and three of four parents in a classroom at HS1. The fourth parent wanted to meet me at bookstore/coffee shop in a neighboring suburb. Upon completion of the interview, recordings from the interview were immediately transferred to a password-protected computer. Five months after each interview was complete, the original data recordings were deleted and destroyed.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed after transcription. Audio play back and reading physical transcripts provided the opportunity to begin to build connections or identify “themes” they may exist across the interviews. Hallmark to qualitative research is the concept of finding similarities across the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, the ultimate goal of data analysis techniques in qualitative research is to identify key themes or concepts (Spencer, Ritchie, & O’Connor, 2003). Qualitative methodologies call for identifying common themes across various sources of information (Creswell, 2007). Individual interview data from HS1 was analyzed using the research questions as a guide to identify themes. After identifying the themes from each parent interview, all of the themes that emerged from the interviews were situated side by side. From there, the common themes observed in all four interviews became the themes that were included in the findings. The same process used to analyze parent interviews was also used for the two HS1 staff interviews. Additionally, field notes were used to provide additional details for each of the portraits.

In qualitative data analysis there are two primary ways to create themes: through descriptive and inferential coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2009). Descriptive coding provides basic similarities about the data itself or the participants (i.e., gender, race, locale, etc.). Inferential coding, however, allows for deeper connections across the data. Inferential coding requires connecting data to guiding theoretical frameworks and research questions (Punch, 2009). In coding, themes can be established from theory (etic), or the data can also present themes (emic) (Maxwell, 2005). For the purposes of this study, themes emerged from the data using the research questions as a guide or compass to find the themes.

Like other forms of qualitative inquiry, it is also true in portraiture that identifying themes from data is both an “iterative and generative process; the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1995, p. 185). To identify these themes it is critical that the researcher, or portraitist, first synthesize the data, and then identify where commonalities and contradictory information might emerge in the data. In addition to traditional data analysis through transcription reviews and audio playback, it was through the creation of the portraits that the comparative and contradictory information emerged. After the four portraits were constructed, the findings were synthesized, which resulted in the identification of the three themes that emerged from this study.

### **Generalizability**

The sample size for this study is small, and the modest sample size may not allow for macro level generalizations that could be gleaned from a study with more participants. Lewis and Ritchie (2003) provide a framework for the various avenues of generalizability. Instead of representational generalization (which is most common), the authors suggest qualitative inquiry may lend itself to inferential generalization. Inferential generalization considers the ways in which findings from a study “can be applied to other settings or contexts beyond the sampled one” (p. 264). As primary methodology for the study, the smaller sample sizes and the detail in which the data is analyzed and the rich descriptions used to craft the portraits lend themselves more to inferential generalizability (Hackmann, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Since the goal of portraiture is to share the deep complexity of the lived experiences of study participants, the hope is that readers will identify themselves in the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997)

assert that the researcher pursues smaller sample sizes to craft the narratives because she believes “that embedded in the reader will discover resonant universal themes. More specific, the more subtle the description the more likely it is to evoke identification” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). Generalizability, then, is more about the reader being able to identify themselves in the data, rather than applying the themes to a larger population. This does not mean that commonalities in the lived experiences of these participants do not exist. In this study portraiture allows for a more in-depth consideration of the factors influencing school choice decisions. The contributions from this study add another perspective and challenge the rational/non-rational binary that currently exists in the school choice literature and augment understandings of parental decision making, particularly giving merit to how social and cultural forces shape decisions.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Validity is principally concerned with the trustworthiness of the research (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2006). In other words, validity is concerned with whether the research is actually investigating what it purports to investigate and, furthermore, if the findings accurately reflect the phenomena in question (Glesne, 2006; Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). In portraiture, validity is likened to authenticity. It is important in creating the narratives that the research create an authentic portrait, one that conveys the truth about one’s lived experiences. In constructing the narrative, it is important the researcher construct a portrait that makes sense to the reader:

In constructing the aesthetic whole, the portraitist seeks a portrayal that is believable, that makes sense that causes that “click of recognition.” We refer to this “yes, of course” experience as resonance, and we see the standard as one of authenticity. The portraitist hopes to develop a rich portrayal that will have resonance (in different ways, from different perspectives) with three audiences:

with the actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the “truth value” of her work. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 247)

Reliability, however, is concerned with the replicability the study. That is, using the same methods outlined above, could another researcher reach the same conclusions of this study (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003; Golafshani, 2003)? Validity and reliability are used in research as “quality control” techniques and provide parameters for producing high quality research (Seale, 1999).

On reliability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that replication in qualitative research is an artificial goal that does not give merit to the complexity of phenomena being researched. The guiding ethos of portraiture methodology does not square well with the conventional, positivist understanding of reliability. While this study can be replicated, new findings might not align to the findings that emerged from this study. Lawrence-Lighfoot and Davis (1997) highlight the complexities that are involved in creating the narrative:

The portrait, then, creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history. And the narrative documents human behavior and experience in context. In fact, the portraitist insists that the only way to interpret people’s actions, perspectives, and talk is to see them in context. (p. 11)

In portraiture, it is the responsibility of the researcher to create a narrative rich in detail; therefore, depending on the context in which this study is replicated, the findings might differ.

It is important to note that in qualitative research the applicability of validity and reliability are contested. Some contend that validity and reliability are concepts rooted in positivism and do not lend themselves to the naturalistic and interpretive positions of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Lewis & Ritchie, 2003;



Seale, 1999), For example, Creswell and Miller (2000) contend that validity in qualitative research is affected (or skewed) by the researcher's perspective on validity as well as the guiding theoretical frameworks. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that "The narrative, then, is always embedded in a particular context, including physical settings, cultural rituals, norms, and values, and historical periods. The context is rich in cues about how the actors or subjects negotiate and understand their experience" (p. 12). Portraiture, therefore, might push against traditional perspectives in social science that view context as a distortion to a traditional scientific experiment. Instead, portraitists view context as source of understanding

Despite the contention, qualitative researchers have identified frameworks for addressing both validity and reliability concerns. For the purposes of this study, validity was addressed through creating portraits rich in detail and using direct quotes from parents and HS1 staff (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In addition, this study used interview data from parents, administrators, and/or counselors to serve as multiple sources of data to further create a full picture of the context and the parental lives of HS1 (Glesne, 2006). To address reliability, Lewis and Ritchie (2003) encourage researchers to draw on five principals throughout conducting a study: (1) the researcher should ensure that the sample selection was made without bias, (2) the investigation should proceed consistently – meaning the researcher should interview each participant with the same protocol, (3) data analysis should be comprehensive, (4) all interpretations of the data should be supported by evidence, and (5) the design of the study should allow for all perspectives on the issue. For the purposes of this study, the five principals were followed.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from the four in-depth interviews with the parents who have enrolled their children in HS1. Each interview will be presented in an individual portrait, a narrative that will paint the picture to offer answers to the research questions of this study. Prior to presenting the portraits, however, it is important that the reader situate the neighborhood and the school in context. As such, the first section of this chapter outlines the history and context of both the neighborhood and the school using data from the interviews with the two school faculty members, who also happen to be graduates of HS1. After presenting the history and context, the portraits from the four interviews with parents will be presented. After the portraits are presented from the interview data, the chapter concludes with the summary of the findings. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Why do parents, despite the availability of choice options enroll their children in low-performing neighborhood schools?
2. What factors do African American parents/guardians in a large urban district consider when enrolling their child(ren) into the neighborhood school?
3. Are African American parents/guardians in a large urban district aware of choice options available? Why do they elect not to utilize those options?

### **HISTORY AND CONTEXT**

The purpose of this section is to outline the landscape of the Sunnyside community and HS1 to provide deeper meaning to the portraits presented later in this chapter. Context, or framing the terrain, is a critical component of portraiture as context is the framework for supporting the portraits in creating meaning in the interviews:

Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do. The context is rich in clues for interpreting

the experience of the actions in the setting. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41)

For the purposes of this study I will draw on my personal and work experiences. For most of my childhood I lived in Detroit, Michigan but, during my high school career, I was able to attend a suburban high school through intra-district choice. Intra-district choice, or school choice for that matter, was not a significant part of the educational policy landscape in Detroit or the neighboring suburbs during the time I was in high school. I actually took advantage of this choice policy at a time where school choice did not dominate the school improvement/reform discourse.

I also draw upon my work experiences for this study. I have a deep affinity for Houston ISD, and particularly HS1, because while I was in graduate school, I worked for the University of Texas at Austin for two years in various high schools across HISD, including HS1. I worked closely with students, parents, and teachers at HS1 as I supported students in their transition from high school to college. It was during this time that I learned a great deal about the school and community context. Moreover, I currently work at a school (not HS1) in the Sunnyside community, which allows me to interact with students and parents from the community on a daily basis.

### **Sunnyside: City Backdrop**

To get to the Sunnyside neighborhood from Downtown Houston, you travel south on State Highway 288 south, the popular Interstate Highway 610 (IH 610). For Houston locals, IH 610, or “the loop” circles the well know Houston Medical Center, Downtown, and the stadiums for the Houston Astros, Rockets, and Texans. Once outside of the loop, the skyline quickly changes from high-rise apartments and restaurant signs to mostly undeveloped land and acres of green-space. Annexed by the city of Houston in 1956, Sunnyside still holds on to its rural roots (Bryant, 2004). On any day beginning in

February you might see a group of young Black men riding their horses down Scott street as they prepare for the trail rides that accompany the annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

One exit after passing the loop is the first (of three) exits to enter the Sunnyside community. The first exit is Belfort and, once on Belfort, you must make a left to enter the Sunnyside community. (If you turn right, you enter into another Houston neighborhood.) After making a left on Belfort you will see a few auto repair shops and a few homes on the one-mile stretch to take you to Scott Street. Scott Street is a main road in the Sunnyside community. On Scott there are small homes occupied by residents next to homes that have been converted into businesses like barbeque restaurants, nail salons, barbershops, and tax offices. Turning on one of the residential streets in Sunnyside one might find small two-story apartment complexes next to several small two to three bedroom homes and a church. Depending on the block you are on, you might see homes with well-manicured lawns and wrought iron gates on the doors. On other blocks you might see dilapidated homes with unkempt lawns.

Sunnyside has always been a predominantly African American community, and that has not changed over time (City Data, 2016). What has changed, however, are other demographic variables. Bonnie Jones, who grew up in Sunnyside, graduated from HS1, and currently works at HS1, shared her memories from her childhood: “It [Sunnyside] was a nice upper middle class community. I remember my neighbors being doctors, teachers, engineers, astronauts, constables, nurses, judges, and those persons...are no longer with us and things have changed.” Michael Hill, who is a former Assistant Principal at HS1 echoed Ms. Jones’s point when discussing the background of the African Americans who once lived in the Sunnyside Community. He recalled that, at one point, Sunnyside was home to several successful Black-owned businesses in the

community. (Indeed the East Sunnyside neighborhood is home to State Senator Rodney Ellis and one of the largest Black-owned plumbing companies in the city of Houston.) But recent economic conditions led to those Black businesses closing down or being forced to relocate. He observed,

So you have business leaders who actually have businesses inside Sunnyside. But what source would you have or could say if you have a business in Sunnyside and you know that 80% of the people can't even shop at your business. For that reason, these companies move out because of the [low] economic standard.

With the out-migration of most of the affluent and middle-class African Americans to the neighboring suburbs (Sugarland, Missouri City, and Pearland), the demographics of Sunnyside have also shifted. Once a middle class community, Sunnyside is now predominately low-income. Census data from 2010 show that the median income in Sunnyside is under \$30,000 per year (City Data, 2016). In my own work with in the Sunnyside community, I worked with several homeless students and students who were being raised by grandparents on fixed incomes. In fact, 100% of the students I supported during my time as a college advisor qualified for free or reduced priced lunch, which is an indicator for socioeconomic status.

Mrs. Jones and Mr. Hill both have thoughts about what has led to the demographic shifts in the community. Ms. Jones attributes the shifts to senior citizen who owned homes in the community:

...[the demographics] have changed drastically through the years as a result of...I would say...deaths of a lot of parents and, as a result, children have grown up and we were always instructed that you should move out of the community because you're supposed to do better than your parents.

The children of the parents who owned homes in the Sunnyside community have left Sunnyside to live in the neighboring suburbs. As such, these parents had no one to leave their homes to when they passed away. These homes typically became rental properties

for families who have Section 8 vouchers (for low-income renters) or were abandoned. The landscape and history of the Sunnyside community is key to contextualizing the data I will present in the portraits, which provide support of the factors that impact school choice decision-making. Also important to setting the stage for the portraits are the history and current context of HS1, which I present next.

### **High School History**

On the corner of two major roads in the Sunnyside community sits HS1. It is built on land donated by the school's namesake in the 1962s with the intent of helping Black youth in the Sunnyside community to graduate from high school. Prior to opening at its current location in 1962, HS1 was three miles down the road at what is now a middle school. HS1 now sprawls across about half of a city block. The bricks on the three-story building are certainly markers for the school's age; some of the bricks on the exterior walls are crumbling. Small shrubs and bushes surround the building and give the historic building a little life. The front of the high school is lined by a seven-foot high black steel fence that can make visitors feel like they are protected at HS1 but leave them wondering who HS1 is trying to prevent from entering the building. The football field at the back of the school has been turned into a mini construction site, as Houston residents voted to give HS1 a new building that is scheduled to open for the 2016-2017 school year.

Since opening its doors in 1952, HS1 has been a predominantly African American high school. In the 1950s when the school first opened, it could accommodate upward of 2,200 students with graduating classes of 850 students. "Back then, HS1 was the only high school that was in the Sunnyside community," said Mr. Hill, "but most of the students who came to HS1 were bussed from the Midtown and Third Ward areas of

Houston.” Midtown and Third Ward are neighboring areas about ten minutes north of Sunnyside.

The school has experienced significant shifts in demographics in terms of socioeconomic status and family composition. As previously mentioned, the Sunnyside community used to be filled with middle class families, and those middle class families sent their children to HS1. With population shifts, and more middle class African American families moving out of the Sunnyside community, the socioeconomic demographics of the school have also changed. Most of the students would qualify for free or reduced priced lunch (and indicator for income) if the families would complete the free/reduced priced lunch application. During the time of our interview, Mr. Hill mentioned that only about one out of eight students had turned in their application for the year, though. Family composition is also unique at HS1. Many of the students at the high school (roughly 33% at HS1) are being raised by their grandparents or other extended family members.

In its early years, HS1 was known for its strong academic programs. For example, Ms. Jones said, “HS1 was always known as one of the best, most influential Black public schools in the state of Texas. It has always been known for its academia as well as a nice middle class community.” In fact, there were Black families who lived outside of Sunnyside who would send their students to HS1. In the past ten years, however, the reputation of HS1 has shifted to one of poor academics and safety concerns. There have been several incidents in HS1, including fights and even murder. Those issues, Ms. Jones maintains, were not directly connected to HS1 but were spillover incidents from some apartment complexes adjacent to the high school. She elaborated, “We may have had incidents with fights but most of the fights that occurred on our campus truly came from students outside of HS1 who came on our campus to be disruptive.”

The academic reputation of HS1 has also changed over time, having once been known for its magnet programs and other specialized programs. At one point in time, HS1 had career and technology courses like auto mechanics, furniture building, and also had a Math, Science, and technology magnet program. As of today, none of those programs exist at the school. With the lower enrollment, the district took away the magnet funding and the funding for the other programs. Mr. Hill argues that the challenges to academics started with the loss of higher performing students to other schools of choice. Now, instead of higher performing students attending HS1, they chose to go to the neighboring public high school, the public charter high school, or the HISD approved Carnegie Vanguard High School. Hill said,

We have lost a lot of students...for the number one reason, programming. They are going to others [Lamar, Bel Air, Carnegie] because of programming. How can you promote math and the sciences when you are dealing with a science lab that has been here since 1962, and still has the same equipment since 1962?

In addition to loss of special programs, HS1 also faced challenges with academic performance. Over the past ten years, HS1 has not consistently met the academic expectations of the state of Texas. Since 2005, HS1 has been labeled either “Academically Unacceptable” or “Improvement Required” six times, three of which have been the past three consecutive years. Because the school has not been meeting state academic expectations, students have been given the option to choose a higher performing school.

Most students opting out, according to both staff members at HS1 that I interviewed, are the school’s highest performing students. They are opting out of HS1 and choosing to attend other neighborhood schools (including the public charter high school nearby). The school that once could educate 2,200 students has a current enrollment of 660 students (Texas Education Agency, 2012). There is still strong alumni



and parental support of HS1, however. In some instances, parents want to enroll their children at HS1 because of the deep tradition and what the school represents to the students' families. Mr. Hill believes that is because parents of children who graduated from HS1 remember how impactful their educational experience was and want their children to have that same experience. He elaborated,

The number one factor a student really wants to come to HS1 is enrolled by their parents because the parent was here at HS1 when HS1 was successful. So the parents still have that culture that "I believe in Green and Gold. I am going to send my child through HS1 because I was economically disadvantaged then, and not I am in corporate America standing [strong]."

To respond to these safety and academic challenges, HS1 has been intentional about making particular improvements. The first thing the school has done is to focus on hiring the right staff. Mr. Hill said in response to a question about how HS1 is responding to its negative reputation that "Well, the number one thing we have done is put an effective teacher in every classroom. That is number one. We have hired teachers who have a genuine stake and interest in the education of students." Additionally, the school has installed more security cameras and locked all external doors to the high school with the exception of the door leading to the main office. These are the two main steps taken by the school to improve the reputation of the school and to retain students.

### **High School Context**

When you enter the iron gate you are led up a walkway going directly to the main office. You must present your school ID to receive your visitor's badge before you can enter the hallways. Every time I have entered the front office of HS1 I have been greeted by friendly front office staff who have smiling faces. The sprawling hallways are painted green with a gold strip running parallel with the ground. The school smells as clean as any high school can smell, but you can certainly smell the metal in the building that has

been there for over 60 years. There are no windows, but the hallways are dimly lit by the ceiling lights, enough to see room numbers on each of the doors and the hallway decorations. There are two hallways that run parallel on opposite sides of the school. The hallways are decorated with school spirit signs, special announcements, college pennants, and you will find athletic trophies from years of athletic excellence in the trophy cases. Halfway through the first hallway is the counselor's suite, housing offices for all the academic advisors and college counselors. This is where I spent most of my time at HS1.

During a class transition the hallways are filled with joy and laughter. Students are in what appears to be a school uniform. Some students wear green, white, or black polo shirts. Some have on khaki pants with the shirts while others sport jeans. There is a sense of urgency for students to get to their next class period, especially since they are being ushered to the next class by teachers and school administrators. At the door of what appears to be an English classroom, the teacher shakes the hand of every student who enters her domain. Some students receive a handshake, others a fist bump. After the bell rings and class begins there are often one or two students walking briskly (or jogging) to their class. Two minutes into instruction, there are no students in the main hallway. In each of the classrooms there are 25 singular desks that look outdated but still functional. The rooms are cinderblocks painted with white paint. Most of the classrooms have inspirational signs or posters or classroom announcements, and the doors have small windows in them.

The current demographics of the school reflect the local community. Of the schools' roughly 660 students currently enrolled at HS1, approximately 87% of the students are African American, with about 74% low-income as measured by free/reduced priced lunch. One aspect not reflected in the Sunnyside community but present in the

high school is that about 20% of the students require special education support. Table 1 shows the changes in enrollment and demographics over time at HS1.

Table 1

Demographic Changes at HS1 from 2005-2015

<b>School Year</b>	<b>State Rating</b>	<b>Student Enrollment</b>	<b>Percent African-American</b>	<b>Percent Latino</b>	<b>Percent Low Income</b>	<b>Percent SPED<sup>1</sup></b>
2005-2006	Academically Acceptable	1088	94%	4.8%	80.5%	21.9%
2006-2007	Academically Acceptable	1026	91.8%	6.8%	62.1%	23.1%
2007-2008	Academically Unacceptable	1022	91%	7.7%	61.4%	22.5%
2008-2009	Academically Unacceptable	1012	91%	7.9%	77.1%	23.3%
2009-2010	Academically Acceptable	1017	91.3%	8.0%	76.5%	23.3%
2010-2011	Academically Unacceptable	932	91%	8.4%	71.8%	22.7%
2011-2012	No Rating <sup>2</sup>	794	88.4%	10.5%	76.7%	22.4%
2012-2013	Improvement Required	717	89.3%	9.6%	76.6%	23.7%
2013-2014	Improvement Required	626	88.3%	10.2%	79.2%	20%
2014-2015	Improvement Required	672	86.3%	12.5%	73.4%	19.6%

What is important to note in this table is that the percentages of students of color has stayed relatively consistent despite a significant enrollment decline. The history and context of both the school and community provide another layer of understanding to the

<sup>1</sup> Special education

<sup>2</sup> In 2011-2012 TEA did not give any school a rating because the state was switching from TAKS to STAAR.

four portraits outlined below. Each portrait illuminates a unique perspective of parents and offers insight into why parents, despite their ability to choose another school, remain at HS1.

**Portrait #1: Mary Johnson**

I met Ms. Johnson in a small, brightly classroom at HS1 after school dismissal. The old faucets and sinks in the classroom were reminiscent of a home economics classroom. The classroom space is now being used for an after school college readiness program. One wall of the classroom was lined with windows, which made the room very bright. The incessant hum from the broken air conditioner provided a consistent background noise in the room.

Ms. Johnson was a few moments late to our interview but, when she walked back into the room, she greeted me with a faint smile and a light handshake. She had a very unassuming and quiet presence. She was not one for small talk; after shaking my hand she sat down in the first seat available to her to begin our interview. Ms. Johnson was also a small woman in stature and in height. She looked like a high school student with her small 5'5" frame and her childish face. As a single mother of four young adult children she did not look older than 35. Prior to starting our interview Ms. Johnson made it clear that she was nervous; she did not like hearing her voice out loud. I assured her that the questions would directly align to her experience with HS1, but that did not seem to calm her nervousness. Between Ms. Johnson's nervousness and the humming air conditioner in the background, I had to restart our interview two times because I could not hear her initial responses to my questions. Her responses to the first set of questions were short. Her left knee feverishly bounced up and down an indication she nervous

answering the questions. As we continued to move forward in the interview she replied with more depth and, by the middle of our interview, her knee had stopped moving.

Ms. Johnson is a 43-year-old single mother of four children, ages 19, 16, 15 and 10, who lives on the Southeast side of Houston. She has lived her entire life on the Southeast side of Houston, and she graduated from Jack Yates High School, approximately 8.4 miles away from HS1. She went to Jack Yates high school because she wanted to go to school with her friends. When asked why she went to Yates she responded, “My friends were there [Yates], that’s why I really went there.” After high school, Ms. Johnson started working immediately and decided that college was not the best next step for her. Most of her career she worked in human resources, but she has been unemployed for the past three years for reasons she did not disclose in our interview.

Ms. Johnson’s two middle children are currently enrolled at HS1, and her oldest daughter graduated from a public charter school near HS1 in 2015 and is taking classes at Houston Community College. For her 15-year-old, who is the primary reference point of this interview, Ms. Johnson did not have very specific goals or aspirations. When asked about the aspirations for her child, Ms. Johnson generically responded,

Well, um... basically, I want her to go to college and just be anything that she wants to be. You know I...I don’t want her to be anything that I want her to be, as long as she’s something, you know, so...that’s basically it.

Ms. Johnson could identify a goal she had for her daughter but also acknowledged that HS1 might have some challenges in supporting her daughter in reaching her goals.

One of those challenges is HS1’s reputation. Ms. Johnson was aware of the school’s reputation prior to enrolling her daughter at the high school:

The only thing I heard about HS1 was that they fight a lot...If I go to the store, you know you can hear people talking and just...I was always told HS1 was a

bad, bad, bad school. Don't send your kids to HS1, so I just thought it was bad a school.

After a student was shot on campus, there was an outcry from community members that the school should be closed because of safety concerns. On one occasion Ms. Johnson recalled coming to the school and being met by a group of women protesting the closure of HS1. She continued, "There was these ladies outside of class and on flyers and stuff umm...because they was talking about shutting the school down but was...I think somebody being shot or something here...".

Despite her prior knowledge of HS1, Ms. Johnson still decided to enroll her daughter into the school. In addition to HS1 being her daughter's zoned school, Ms. Johnson maintains that HS1 has programs that are important to her daughter's high school experience like band, theatre, and the after school college readiness program. Due to financial challenges at the school, however, the theatre program is on hiatus.

While the consistent poor accountability ratings of the school might reflect one picture, Ms. Johnson sees things another way. When discussing her daughter's academic performance and if she sees positive things happening academically at the school, Ms. Johnson said she does not see positive things happening academically at the school but attributes her observations to her daughter's lack of investment in her academic achievement. She said,

I don't see it [positive things with academics]. No not at all. Because I'm thinking she needs more help and things but I don't think it's the teachers. It's really the students you know. She's not applying herself...I think the teachers are good...it's just the students not applying themselves.

With the challenges with the school reputation and the poor academics, Ms. Johnson still did not want to enroll her child in another high school. Although Ms. Johnson did not choose an alternative high school for her children, she is no stranger to school choice and choice options for her children. Her oldest daughter attended and graduated from a public

charter school near HS1, and the daughter currently enrolled in HS1 attended a charter middle school for a year, but chose to attend HS1 for high school because of social and academic challenges she had at the middle school. Ms. Johnson observed,

She's always been problems as far as grades, not doing her work and letting people get to her and all this stuff. Instead of doing her work she would let people, you know...mess with her, take her off her game.

However, when explicitly asked about her knowledge about school choice, Ms. Johnson referenced her individual school experiences:

No...I don't really know schools like that you know...different high schools and stuff like that because I didn't keep up with that kind of stuff. I went to Ryan [middle school] for three years. All of my friends went to Ryan and then they went to Yates.

Ms. Johnson was aware that HS1's state accountability rating allowed her to choose another public school but, as a parent, decided to keep her student enrolled at HS1 because she believed the school does not determine how successful a student is, the student does. When asked if Ms. Johnson thought about sending her daughter to another school, Ms. Johnson said,

It's got to be the student. She's not applying herself. If she not applying herself you can go to any school you want...any bad school, any school in the world...but if you're not listening to that person [teacher] then what are you going to learn?

The primary draw to HS1 for Ms. Johnson was the after-school program at the high school. The program started last year and provides students with college readiness opportunities (college visits and college application support) along with career readiness (resume and internship programs). This afterschool program is especially appealing to Ms. Johnson because it connects to her overall college readiness goal for her daughter: "Yeah...yeah I was [aware that she could go to other schools], I mean, I just... really love the [after school program], I really do." In fact, Ms. Johnson allows her daughter to

participate in the after school program even if her daughter's grades do not meet expectations: "I mean, she might not be passing all her classes, but she can go to the [after school program] but she can't just go to band." The work that the after school program does (college visits, after school workshops, and summer camps) is important to Ms. Johnson: "I think maybe, you know, the after school program, the way they are talking like they could help her be college ready, you know, and stuff like that is really appealing to me."

There were other options available for Ms. Johnson and her children, and Ms. Johnson was aware of such choices. At one point during their high school career, both her son and daughter wanted to leave HS1, but those schools did not have the afterschool program that Ms. Johnson liked so much: "You know uh...if she was to go to...what's that, Milby? She wouldn't be in the afterschool program, so that's what really, really moved me to make her stay." For Ms. Johnson it was not about the academic environment at the high school, rather, it was the supplemental programming that supports her vision for her daughter that keeps Ms. Johnson and her children enrolled at HS1:

What is really preparing her for college is the after school program. I mean, they teaching her what they supposed to teach her but I don't think they actually preparing her for college like the [after school program] is. Actually taking her to campuses and stuff like that. They're [HS1] is not doing that."

Ms. Johnson knew HS1 was not preparing her daughter to be college ready, but the afterschool program offered at the school satisfied the desire she had for her daughter to be college ready.



## **Portrait #2: Belinda King**

Unlike all of the other interviews, I was able to meet Ms. King at the coffee shop inside of a bookstore in a suburb of Houston. Ms. King arrived at 5:00pm sharp for our 5:00 pm interview. I could only tell that she had been working all day (I would later learn that she is an elementary school teacher at an HISD elementary school) because I could see the bags underneath her eyes on her make-up free face. Her hair was neatly combed in a ponytail and she greeted me with a warm and friendly smile. She confidently sat down and was eager to share her story.

Ms. King has a traditional academic background, but she took a non-traditional path to earn her college degree. She grew up in Louisiana and graduated from St. Martinville High School. She lived and worked in education in Louisiana until she moved to Southeast Houston with her family in 2004. Ms. King worked as a Pre-K teacher in LaMarque ISD, a suburb about 40 minutes south of Houston. While working at LaMarque ISD, Ms. King went on to finish her bachelor's degree from Texas Southern University in 2006 and earned her Master's degree from Capella University in 2012. She is currently working to earn a certificate in Educational Leadership.

Ms. King is a single mother with three children ages 21, 16, and 15. Her oldest daughter is a graduate of HS1 and is currently at student at a community college in Louisiana and has plans to go to medical school after graduating from community college. Her other two children, ages 16 and 15, are currently enrolled in the tenth grade at HS1 after both of them spent four years enrolled a public charter middle school and one year in the public charter high school. She made the decision to enroll her children in HS1 because of challenges the students were having at the public charter school. She recounted,

[The charter school] was very rigorous for the kids. Uh, that's the only word I can think of right now. It was just very rigorous...From that first year [4th grade]... the same pattern. Like, it seemed like progressively they...it would have gotten easier, but it didn't. Every year it was just like a struggle. It was just like [their] grades were not up to par. Behavior was not up to par. So all the way around they [her children] never progressed. They never adjusted.

Some of the challenges with her two children with the charter school were attributed the structure of the school, especially in the transition from middle school to high school:

Yeah, and the rules was a lot for them. The rules were a lot, and there was no freedom or flexibility. And they worked for all those years, and the ninth grade, you know, I just got to the point, you know what. I'm tired. I don't wanna fight with y'all no more. I don't want the phone calls, all this – and on my job anymore. I felt high school would have been more different because I'm thinking, okay, they're going to high school. They're gonna be a little more relaxed, but it just seemed like it was just the same as the middle school part, and there was no difference, no relax.

In addition to the academic and cultural expectations at the public charter high school, Ms. King also claimed that, at the charter school, her children did not have the relationships with teachers she had expected for students once they got to high school. In high school, Ms. King says, “I remember [in high school] you have a little more relationship with your teachers, and y'all kind of can, not in an inappropriate way of course, but you know you can joke around or have a little conversation with the teachers.”

Due to the challenges her children had at the public charter high school, Ms. King believes that the decision to enroll her students at HS1 has been beneficial:

I put them in HS1. Part of it is better. I don't get the behavior calls as much. Of course, you know, they have a little more freedom, and the teachers probably have bigger issues to deal with than my daughter talking in class and my son's cynical behavior in class.

The decision to change schools, though, did not rest solely with Ms. King. She did make the decision, but it was not without the influence of her daughter, who was especially

having challenges at the charter high school. Ms. King claims that she was in a situation where her children were not performing well academically and socially at a charter school, and claimed that it was at HS1 where they would perform better. With all the challenges her children faced at HS1, it made sense for her to transfer them to a school in which they [her children] claimed that they would be more successful:

As parents growing up, you know coming from home where parents are the only decision maker, you know what it's like to have no input. I felt their education and the school that they felt that they would do well in, they should've had input on. So I did, I gave them input.

Ms. King's youngest daughter appeared to have the most influence in the decision, which resulted in the younger child having to change schools also. Ms. King also claimed that the younger brother was not doing well at the public charter high school either:

But he wasn't doing well either, so you know I didn't see a point to me to leave you here, "You're not passing your classes, you're not behaving, the teachers are call me every day...so what's the point of staying, you know..." If she feels she's gonna do better there, she put forth some effort. It wasn't her best [effort]."

As far as her children having better relationships with teachers, Ms. King described that she sees potential for positive relationships with students and teachers at HS1: "Yeah, I mean I do see that teachers at HS1 [try to have relationships], some of them it's hard because they still have the knuckleheads in class."

What is unique to Ms. King's educational journey for her children is that her oldest daughter attended HS1 from grades 9-12 and was an honor student while she was there. When the family moved to a neighborhood near HS1 in 2004, the only school Ms. King knew about was HS1 as it was her daughter's zoned school. From her first day at HS1, Ms. King's daughter was invested in the positive things happening at HS1: "From day one since she got there, she was on board and, you know, the AP classes, and she was

in the magnet program.” The academic programs were not the only things that kept her first daughter invested in HS1:

The band was a big part of her keeping focused because she loved the band. If she didn’t do well in school, she couldn’t be a part of the band. She did what she had to do to maintain her spot in the band.

Her daughter was also invested in HS1 because she was able to participate in co-curricular activities

There are, however, differences in the experiences between Ms. King’s oldest daughter’s experiences and those of her two children currently enrolled in HS1. Her two children currently enrolled in HS1 are in on-level courses and they do not participate in any special academic programs at the school. When I specifically asked Ms. King about her perceptions of the school’s academic quality, she did not speak to any specific difference in quality; rather, she acknowledged that other factors like student discipline challenges might prevent teachers from fully teaching necessary curriculum in the classroom:

Well I know no matter where you are...what high school you are in in HISD everyone does have a curriculum to follow...I would say that sometimes the teachers don’t always get that opportunity to teach, [at HS1], what they planned because they’re focusing on discipline and those big major distractions, but they still have the same standardized tests as everybody.

The curriculum is not the challenge, claims Ms. King, but rather what students are doing, or not doing, in the classroom that prevents them from mastering the curriculum. As we stayed in our discussion on the academic quality of HS1, the conversation shifted focus to how her children are performing in the classroom. She remarked,

No, no, they’re [her children] just in on-level classes...they’re basic classes, no AP, no advanced classes. They’re just basic students. They’re not trying...they’re not willing to push themselves any further. They just want to get where they have to get.

While overall Ms. King is happy with the decision to enroll her students at HS1, there are some challenges she is experiencing at HS1. Ms. King names consistency at the school to be her primary concern. When her oldest daughter was in the band, the band teacher had been the same person for four years. In addition, Ms. King's currently enrolled daughter had tried out and made the dance team, but has been unable to dance because of dance teacher turnover. Now at HS1 there are inconsistencies, specifically with those two teachers/programs. She expressed,

They didn't start all of that [auditions] until the start of the year. She made the dance team, and was going to practices, but since they started late, they weren't ready for her to go out on the field. They haven't gone to any games or on the field...not even the homecoming game.

In addition to the band and dance programs, Ms. King highlights teacher attrition and leadership changes, especially in the principal position as sources of inconsistency: "I think it's good for kids to have an example that remains, that's not constantly changing, as far as the principal, as far as the faculty. I guess it changes because of the school environment." Ms. King offered her belief as to what might be leading to teachers and school leaders leaving the school:

Maybe they [HS1 leadership] do have a genuine interest in kids completing high school and getting their diploma, but what that means is that you're accepting every kid... We live in a neighborhood where you have different people, different backgrounds, different, you know, everything. So you have all of that mixed together...everybody just doesn't display the same values [toward education].

Overall Ms. King believes that HS1 is helping her children reach their goals. When I explicitly asked Ms. King if she believed that HS1 was the school to support her children toward reaching their goals, her response included the academic programming options available to her children and that the opportunities HS1 exposes her children to are impressive to her: "There are some programs [at the school] that students can take

depending on what they want to do [as a career].” Her son is taking a few classes related to the medical field as that is what he would like to pursue after high school. Her daughter is taking classes at HS1 connected to hospitality. Last year the students were able to go on a field trip to the Toyota center to what sounded like a career fair to learn more about different careers they could pursue after high school graduation: “They had a big summit [at the Toyota Center] and got information about different experiences that are in line with what they want to do in the future.” Ms. King said these types of opportunities help push her children to have a vision for their future.

Although she did not know the school’s accountability rating, Ms. King is aware that she can send her children to other public schools. “I know we have an opportunity to go elsewhere,” she said, “I get that every year.” She does not have any plans to take her children to another school because she understands that HS1 is the best school for her children:

I know my children; they can’t go anywhere else. They do enough to stay at HS1 ...It doesn’t make sense for us to go out of [our] zoned area. They don’t do enough to go anywhere else. There is no need of me pretending they’re gonna go somewhere else and do, you know, we’ll work a miracle over there. It’s not the school, it’s you... You’re responsible for your education. No one else is.

### **Portrait #3: Annie Eglan**

I met Ms. Eglan in one of the empty classrooms in one of the sprawling hallways of HS1 after the afterschool program that her grandson participates in had concluded for the day. She appeared unassuming, her petite 5’4” frame draped in baggy sweat clothes. She was an older, wiser woman. Pieces of her gray hair peeked through the cap she was wearing and her glasses fit firmly to her face. The dark circles and wrinkles under her eyes tell a rich life journey filled with the wisdom of her lived experiences coupled with years of work. I would later learn that she is a widowed, retired mother of six. She spent

the majority of her career working in the billing department at M.D. Eglan Cancer Center. She walked slightly bent over to her interview chair and let out a deep sigh before we started the interview. I shared the interview consent documents and she read each and every line. After five minutes of reading she gave her consent for our interview. In the first few answers to my questions, her voice was quiet, almost inaudible, but as we continued on in our interview her voice grew stronger.

Ms. Eglan grew up in Southeast Houston and has lived in southeast Houston, and in her current neighborhood, for about 40 years. She is the mother of six and a grandmother to 30 children. Unlike the other parents in this study, Ms. Eglan became a parent again later in life when she unexpectedly adopted her grandson when he was 15 years old. She did not go into much detail in our interview around the circumstances that brought them together permanently. In a moment of reflection, however, at the end of our interview she mentioned that she

hated what his momma did what she did. I didn't know I was going to have him until they went to court. I didn't even know anything was going on with him, beside he come and spend the night with me. It was a big shock. She [the judge] say all right, you can go with me. I said what!?!? I said do you know that all of my children are in their late 30s and I'm getting these children, young. Ohh, it took a whole lot.

After adopting her grandson and his two little sisters, she turned her attention to where he was going to go to high school.

Prior to enrolling to HS1, Ms. Eglan enrolled her grandson at another public high school 3.1 miles away from HS1. Although her grandson did not go into detail with her or provide specifics, she believed he was having a difficult time adjusting to the school, especially when it came to his interactions with his peers. Ms. Eglan described,

Well, he did say he didn't like the people... Whenever he would say that student did this or that I would ask him did he tell the teachers? And he would answer "Well, I talk to them, and they don't do nothing."

After a year at the neighboring high school, Ms. Eglund decided it was time for her to enroll her grandson in another school.

Although she would eventually enroll her grandson in HS1, Ms. Eglund attempted to enroll her grandson at a charter high school after leaving his first high school. She was unsuccessful because the charter school claimed they did not have the special education programs her grandson needed. When I asked Ms. Eglund if she had heard of any other type of high school options, she responded "Charters, yeah...like, uh one school I was trying to enroll him in...what's the name? I can't remember. They say he couldn't get in the school. I forget the name of the school but we couldn't go." I tried to help her recall the names of the schools, but she did not recognize any of the names that I mentioned. "I forget the name of the school," she said, "They didn't have a program, he's special education, you know, being in the special education classes and stuff." Because the charter school claimed they did not have the SPED programs her grandson needed she moved on to HS1. At HS1, Ms. Eglund knows that her grandson is getting the services that he needs: "HS1 had them kind of classes. He had to go to a school where they had them kind of classes to help him."

Ms. Eglund believes that in addition to HS1 providing her grandson with the instructional support he needs, she also believes he is adjusting better at HS1 than the other high school because of his reports to her:

They [HS1] maintain the kids, you know, help them out a lot. Because, you know, life keep coming on, you know. He tells me a whole lot, you know, that he's interested in the school and it [HS1] is not like the other schools he was going to. It's different here [for him].



Ms. Eglund's positive perspective about HS1 is not only shaped by her grandson's lived experiences; she also says that in her daily interactions with people that she has never heard anything negative about the school:

I've never heard no downtalk about HS1... You know, people who I have worked with, who went to HS1 and they will tell me it's a good school, and I have never heard of no downfall about it [HS1]. I mean HS1, I heard it was a good school. Like I said, I know a lot of people who went here who turned out to be successful.

Her experience with her grandson at HS1 contrasts the experiences she had with her own children at Jack Yates high school in the third ward. All of Ms. Eglund's children attended and graduated from Yates high school, and she does not recall any positive experiences at Yates. Ms. Eglund described her experiences:

I don't like Yates... From my standing Yates was the kind of school where they always picking, fighting, and carrying on. They [the students] did not act like they were taught right. They [a teacher from the school] was always calling me and telling me "your child did this, or they didn't do that." You're the teacher, what are you there for? I can't run every time something happens.

When I asked about the relationship that she felt she had with HS1, she said she believes it to be a positive relationship: "I haven't heard from anybody [at the school]... So things must be alright."

To compliment the positive feelings Ms. Eglund has with HS1 are the positive opportunities that HS1 provides to her grandson. This point brings me back to the start of our interview. Ms. Eglund and I met in the classroom where the after-school program meets two times per week to share college and career-readiness skills with students. She talked about an opportunity her grandson had to go to Florida to visit colleges at the end of last year: "Well, during the summertime, they had a trip. He went out of town to Fort Lauderdale. They stayed, I'd say for about eight days and learned about college and things".

What Ms. Eglan d appreciates most about HS1 is that the school provides opportunities for her grandson to get involved in different programs and pursue playing basketball. Athletics, especially basketball, is important to her grandson. On the day of our interview, her grandson learned that he did not make the varsity basketball team, but he might have an opportunity to play at the junior varsity level. Ms. Eglan d had anticipated this news because her grandson came home after tryouts and shared with her that he had made a mistake at tryouts: “I told him something I have to tell myself... You have to realize you can’t be the best person all the time. Don’t get upset over it, you just have to take your time.” Despite her disappointment in the fact that her grandson did not make the varsity basketball team at HS1, she knows he will still have an opportunity to compete and do what he loves: “He don’t always talk about homework, but he is always talking about basketball [at this school]. He like the coaches and what they are trying to do.”

She is not aware of the accountability rating of the school, and she has no plans to move him to another school. Her ultimate goal for her grandson is to be the best man he can be. When I asked her about the dreams and aspirations she had for him she replied, “Now I can’t answer this. You know, that would be up to him, you know. My goal is for him to make a better person out of himself and [he] will lead himself the right way.”

#### **Portrait #4: Rhonda Crosson**

The parent who is perhaps in the most unique situation of the four interviewees is Ms. Crosson. In addition to her being the parent of a student currently enrolled in HS1, she is also employed at the school. Our interview, though, focused solely on her role as a parent with a student enrolled at the school, and I was mindful to keep the focus of the conversation centered on her son, who is currently a junior at HS1.

I met with Ms. Crosson after school in her office at HS1. Her office, although small, contained years of memories. Every wall and available space included dozens of pictures of current and former students. Some of the pictures included the children of her former students who have graduated from HS1 and started their own families. On the back of the door to her office is a picture of her eldest daughter, who is currently a senior at The University of Texas at Austin.

For the interview Ms. Crosson sat behind her desk; I sat across from her desk in the chair where I estimate hundreds of students have sat during her ten-year tenure at HS1. The room was dark with only natural sunlight coming from the window facing the mini mall across the street from the school. Ms. Crosson wore an HS1 shirt as our interview was in the middle of homecoming week at the high school, and she greeted me with a big, genuine smile. What stood out with Ms. Crosson was how well put together she was. There was not on hair on her head out of place on her 5'7" foot frame, and her well manicured nails all were a signal of a boundless (although humble) self-confidence she carried. We started our interview at exactly 4:00 pm and started our discussion with questions about her background then seamlessly transitioned into questions about her son.

Ms. Crosson is a product of Houston Independent School District. She graduated from Westbury High School in a year she would not disclose. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Business and her Masters of Business Administration from a nearby university. She started out at HS1 as a classroom teacher teaching one of HS1's career and technology courses. Over time her role changed, and she asked to move out of the classroom into a counselor role. She counseled at HS1 for three years before her position was actually furloughed due to budget cuts. The current principal invited Ms. Crosson back to HS1 and offered her the position she currently holds.

Along the journey between earning her bachelor's degree and her MBA, Ms. Crosson got married and had three children: one girl and two boys. Her daughter is currently a senior at The University of Texas at Austin majoring in business. Her eldest son is currently working on earning an auto mechanical certificate. Her son, who is currently a junior at HS1, did not start his ninth grade year at HS1. His journey to HS1 started when he enrolled at Jack Yates High School, a high school in third ward of Houston, at the start of his ninth grade year.

None of Ms. Crosson's older children attended HS1 because, at the time, programs at other high schools were more appealing to her children. During the time her daughter could select a high school to attend, the district had an open enrollment policy that allowed a student to go to any school in the district as long as the family of the student provided transportation: "My daughter was either going to go to Booker T. Washington or to Madison. She chose Madison because of their ROTC program." When it was time for her son to select a high school, Ms. Crosson shared her son selected Jack Yates High School for another reason: athletics. He stayed there for his entire ninth grade year and the first semester of his tenth grade year but, because of his behavioral challenges, Ms. Crosson had to make the decision for him to come to HS1. Ms. Crosson said she made the decision for him to leave Yates because

he had a few minor discipline issues at Yates, nothing that was a reflection of Yates, just a reflection of my son. We had run our course at that particular time. We had tried every avenue, every right turn, every left turn, every U turn that we could do, and that was my only option for him.

Ms. Crosson's son's negative experience at Yates was particularly concerning for her because during his time in middle school he had been a pre-AP student and recommended for the magnet program. This point is particularly important because during middle

school, Ms. Crosson gave her son some flexibility in whether he wanted to go in the magnet program in middle school:

Believe it or not, he has a good game; where he as a sixth grader talked me out of pushing him to go to the magnet [school]. He said things like, “I have been in magnet [in elementary school]. You know I want to meet new friends.” So allowing me to, I guess you could say bamboozled, because that’s what I was and I let him leave the magnet program.

When the challenges at Yates were causing concern for Ms. Crosson, she did not allow herself to be “bamboozled”:

We had talked. We did the parent counseling, we called dad in. I think we did everything and my last option was to bring him here [to HS1] so that he could be monitored by me... I had to step in and use my authority to do what I needed to do to make sure things were right.

Since coming to HS1, Ms. Crosson has noticed positive changes in her son’s behavior and his academic performance: “He is beginning to calm down a little bit and trying to actually see the big picture.” Her son now plays both basketball and football, and is interested in taking AP classes. Ms. Crosson attributes the changes in her son’s perspective to the other students who attend HS1. The various lived experiences of those students at HS1 broadens his perspective on the challenges that students at HS1 face just to come to school. She elaborated,

I think HS1 is doing an excellent job of preparing students for what is outside of these doors. Our kids are faced with a lot of things that even as an adult that I have never faced. I have never had to come to school from a house with no electricity. We have always had water. I didn’t have to worry about if I was going to have clean clothes to come to school...I think there is just a whole array of things that go on here [HS1] that are good and bad and allow him to actually see what’s going on the other side, you know?

When asked about the positive things at HS1, Ms. Crosson could not help but to put her “employee hat” back on. She was, however, able to connect some of the other positive things happening at the school to what she is also seeing in her son. One of things Ms.

Crosson cited as positive at HS1 was the school's increased emphasis on rigorous instruction in the classroom with the ultimate goal of pushing students to become college ready: "We are trying to build a culture...a more rigorous culture to let [student's] know that somebody is not going to be there to hold your hand all of the time." Teachers across multiple content areas are assigning work that might require students to come to tutorials. Ms. Crosson also mentioned, "just the other day her son was commenting on how much work he was receiving in his English class. He said 'man our English teacher...we just finished an assignment and now she is giving us something else.'" Her response was "Baby, welcome to college."

Additional evidence of a continued emphasis on rigorous instruction can be observed in the increased number of students who graduate from HS1 and go on to college. Although Ms. Crosson could not share the exact number, she said, "I would say that teaching and learning *is* actually going on because of the number of students that we are sending to college, the number of kids who are actually going, going to college." In our conversation Ms. Crosson did not connect the role of the new academic programming has on her son, but she did mention it as another area of strength for HS1:

I know that with our health sciences program, we are on the map. I know that it is difficult for us to compete with Debakey – high school of health professions – because they are well established, but if you have that ninth grader that is coming in, and maybe they applied to Debakey and are not accepted because of various reasons, then they know that at HS1 they can still participate in health sciences. You know the clinic that is on campus where the kids are working are able to work at the Baylor Clinic that they have in the tech center. I think that is very positive.

Even through there are certainly beacons of positive things evidenced at HS1, there are still areas of growth for the school. For Ms. Crosson, additional athletic programs are what the school needs to attract and retain students. Although her son plays both football

and basketball at the varsity level, she claims the lack of athletic offerings is what often stops a student from enrolling at HS1 directly from middle school:

I think we can't compete [with other schools] because it is not even offered... We are not in a situation where we can have a junior varsity/JV or freshman team because we [HS1] don't have the number of students. If you have an entire eighth grade basketball team who won district at Woodson [middle school] to come over here to HS1 when they are ninth graders, they cannot play basketball here.

Students' inability to play basketball at the freshman level is just one example of why students might choose to attend another high school in the district where the JV and freshman levels of athletics are offered. She continued, "We have quite a few students who are zoned to HS1 going to Lamar [high school] for baseball, swimming, and basketball."

For Ms. Crosson, she keeps her son enrolled at HS1 because of the positive changes she has noticed in his behavior. Ms. Crosson is aware of the accountability rating of the school, but has no plans on transferring her son to another school:

At first, enrolling in HS1 was supposed to be a temporary thing, to let him know that I was in control. He came October of his tenth grade year and I was going to let him ride it out. Then his eleventh grade year, I was going to go ahead and let him go back to Yates. So, no, I think maybe you [her son] got more mature. We can work things out or whatever. Then in the summer, you know, he was like, "Man, I am getting ready to go with Coach Malone." He got into a summer program at the school, he did his Spanish on Apex. I am like okay, you know what, and I ain't going say nothing.

Ultimately the goal for Ms. Crosson is for her son not only to attend college but also to be better prepared for a world outside of high school:

I guess could say that in life and adulthood and when you become a parent you want better for your children. I want my kids to be stable and secure and be well-rounded citizens, be able to maintain themselves as well as if I live long enough to be able to maintain my lifestyle and the way I live.

She believes that HS1, along with his own personal experiences, are helping him reach that goal: “I just think that HS1 is preparing him for what’s out there, to be productive and to be able to take care of himself.

## **CONCLUSION**

The four portraits above, through the voices of the study participants, illustrate the complexities that surround school choice and decision making for families. Through their voices, it is clear that school choice decisions are often nuanced and require exploration beyond conventional understandings of rational choice. Each of these parents had previous experiences with alternative school options yet opted in to HS1. These previous experiences, widely disregarded in the current literature on school choice, deserve consideration and should be added to the academic discourse on choice as research in this area evolves. The next chapter will synthesize the findings and explicitly answer the research questions posed for this study and conclude with my own reflections and recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to investigate why parents, even when presented with options to choose, remained in their neighborhood schools that were labeled as low performing. This chapter will synthesize the findings presented in Chapter four and align them to the overarching themes that emerged from the data to explicitly answer the research questions posed for this study. Prior to synthesizing the themes and answering the research questions, it is critical that the research questions be re-visited as the goal of this study centers on better understanding parental school choice decisions through the voice of parents. After presenting the research questions, structuration theory as the primary conceptual framework for this study will be revisited. It is through structuration theory that the themes emerged from the data and will be analyzed. I will also revisit the assumptions of school choice with specific attention to how the findings from this study either align to, or challenge, the conventional wisdom of school choice. In addition, I will discuss the limitations of this study. Finally, this chapter concludes with school choice policy recommendations.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research study leveraged portraiture methodology, as it best aligned with the conceptual framework of the study. Portraiture, unlike other forms of qualitative methodologies, marries the science of inquiry with artistic expression. It empowers the researcher to use evidence of interviews and their own field observations to create narratives, or portraits, of the lived experiences of study participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In portraiture the researcher takes a more “active, engaged position in which one searches for the story, seeks it out, is central in its creation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). Portraiture allows the researcher to better share the

world in which participants live. By sharing their world, the researcher taps in to the context that shapes decision-making. It is context, according to structuration theory (Valdez, 2008), coupled with individual agency that shapes parental decisions. By using portraiture methodology and structuration theory, the results from this study provide profound insight into how parents make school choice decisions. The following research questions guided this study on parental school choice decisions:

1. Why do parents, despite the availability of choice options enroll their children in low-performing neighborhood schools?
2. What factors do African American parents/guardians in a large urban district consider when enrolling their child(ren) into the neighborhood school?
3. Are African American parents/guardians in a large urban district aware of choice options available? Why do they elect not to utilize those options?

The research questions above were the foundation guiding the conversations with parents. The next section revisits structuration theory as it is the conceptual framework used for this study. Structuration theory is the lens by which the themes that emerged from the data in chapter four will be analyzed.

## **STRUCTURATION THEORY**

For the purposes of this study, structuration theory offers a balanced theoretical framework as the school choice research demonstrates that although parents have agency in making individual school decisions, the social and cultural contexts, or structures, in which these parents leverage their agency may actually impact, limit, or buffer such decisions. Instead of the evaluation of parental choice decisions as either being rational or non-rational, as the school choice research literature would suggest, structuration theory provides a lens to explore decisions holistically, which may challenge the notions of rational choice in the current framing of parents' school choice decisions.

The decisions parents make around schools is a much more nuanced process and, as the findings from this study suggest, academic performance alone is not the only factor that drives parental decision making. The next section of this study examines each of the themes that emerged from the findings: the role of context in parental decision making, the choice landscape that exists as a result of contextual changes over time, and internal beliefs about academic performance through the lens of structuration theory. Each section, separated by theme, will also synthesize the findings presented in chapter 4 to explicitly answer the research questions of this study.

### **Theme 1: The Role of Context in Shaping Decisions**

The context of the community has shaped the decisions in which parents ultimately can make for their children. The changing context created a limited school choice landscape from which parents could choose. The Sunnyside community, like most urban cities, has experienced demographic shifts over time. Middle class flight has changed this once thriving middle class community to one that is predominantly low income. The middle class students who once filled the halls of HS1 slowly have been replaced by those students who have greater economic and educational needs. Over the past ten years HS1 has held steady with roughly 20% of its students requiring special education services, 75% qualifying for free or reduced priced lunch, and higher percentages of students not passing the state end-of-course assessments, all while seeing a significant decrease in enrollment (from 1,088 students in 2006 to 672 in 2015).

At the same time, the school experienced changes in its student population and academic declines also occurred at the school. The school has not met the state accountability expectations (either being identified by the Texas Education Agency as In Need of Improvement, Needs Improvement or, Improvement required) six out of the past

ten years. Mr. Hill and Ms. Jones, the two HS1 staff members I interviewed, attributed the changes in the community coupled with changes to the traditional family structure (i.e., grandparents becoming primary caretakers for their grandchildren) as leading to the decline in the school's academic outcomes. They also said that the students leaving are those who are relatively higher achieving, and/or non-special needs, leaving the school with a higher proportion of students with academic and learning needs

This low academic performance over time created the opportunity, via the state accountability system, for students and parents to leave HS1 and attend other schooling options. Both HS1 staff members interviewed said that students are attending higher performing high schools (public and charter) that have the academic and athletic programs of interest to students and families. At the same time, as families left via choice and residential mobility, the options at the school narrowed, making it harder for HS1 to "compete." With the decline in enrollment at HS1, the programs that once kept students at the school, for example cosmetology and science programs, were phased out. Mr. Hill commented on the difficulty in trying to retain and bring back HS1's top talent without updated resources and technology. Ms. Crosson discussed how challenging it has been to keep the top athletic talent at HS1, as other schools could offer freshman and junior varsity playing opportunities that HS1 simply could not offer because of resources and enrollment.

HS1 has also been plagued with challenges to its reputation. In all of the interviews, parents and school staff mentioned the negative press at HS1 in recent times. According to Mr. Hill and Ms. Jones, the reports of violence at the school had nothing to do with students who were enrolled at the school at the time, but media still attributed fights and gun violence to the school, which ultimately compromised the school's reputation. Parents from three of the four portraits mentioned the fights and the shooting

but they neither remained fixed on the issues nor honed in on the school reputation or notions of school safety as something with significant meaning to them.

The charters nearby, however, often presented limited options. Several parents had tried local charter schools and found them lacking. One parent interviewed did not think the charter school she tried for her children provided the social opportunities she believed her children needed. The charter school had very rigid behavioral expectations and had few supports for her children. Another parent had a daughter who attended and graduated from the local charter school but her younger children – now enrolled in HS1 – had difficulties adjusting to the charter school. She noted rigid behavioral expectations at the middle school and her children’s low academic performance in middle school as contributing to her enrolling her children at HS1 for high school instead of the local charter high school. Charter schools were not the only relatively limited option for parents; other neighborhood high schools were also not matches for their children. Two of the parents in the study had negative experiences at other public schools. Behavior challenges and adjustment issues led to both parents transferring their children to HS1.

In sum, the social context of the community shaped and, in fact, narrowed the set of choices that parents could exercise. On the one hand, the parents in this study had opted in to the other options available but were unsatisfied. On the other hand, HS1 was a school limited in resources and programming and struggling to serve a high concentration of students with needs. As such, parents were left with a fairly constrained, or limited, set of schools from which choose.

## **Theme 2: The Appeal of HS1: Education is More than Academics**

One common thread among all of these parents is they intentionally chose to enroll their children in HS1. Each of them utilized their options to choose within the

imperfect or limited marketplace described in Theme 1, either with older children or the children currently enrolled at HS1. Despite the changes in the school, HS1 remained a public comprehensive high school offering parents and students things they felt were important to the educational experience of their children. Beyond academics, parents discussed at length their satisfaction with the fine arts, special education, athletic, and after school programs at the school. For many of the parents, these programs anchored them, and their children, to HS1. Ms. Johnson and Ms. Eglund had children enrolled in HS1 who required special education services; in fact, Ms. Eglund specifically mentioned that she knew HS1 has the special education supports for her grandson. She also mentioned that one of the schools she tried to enroll him in prior to HS1 claimed they did not have those supports.

In three of the four interviews, parents mentioned HS1's fine arts programs as something important to their children, hence important to them at the school. Parents did articulate, however, that inconsistencies in teachers and requirements for participation in these programs could be improved. The band director changed in the middle of year, resulting in irregularities in expectations for performance. Ms. Johnson, especially, was upset with the idea that her daughter could be failing courses on her report card yet still be allowed to participate in band practices and performances. Ms. King was excited that her daughter wanted to be on the dance team, and she planned to use it as a tool to motivate her daughter in her academic performance. Due to a teacher transition, however, the dance program had a delayed start, and her daughter was unable to perform for a majority of the first semester.

Athletics was also named as a bright spot in HS1, specifically for Ms. Crosson. Her son transferred to HS1 from another high school. He initially went to the other high school to play basketball and at HS1 not only was he invited to play basketball, he was

also asked to play football. Ms. Crosson attributed her son's increased involvement in the athletic programs at the schools as a pseudo retention tool for him. The transition to HS1 was only supposed to be temporary. Instead of pushing his mom enroll him back at Yates, however, he spent his summer between his sophomore and junior year school going to summer football practices at HS1.

Another factor important for the families interviewed for this study was the unique partnership HS1 forged with a national organization to form an after school program. The afterschool program operated at the school focuses on college and career readiness. In their interviews Ms. Johnson and Ms. Egland spoke of a trip to Florida sponsored by the program. Ms. Johnson noted how this program was especially beneficial to her daughter and attributed the afterschool program as the primary source preparing her daughter for college.

Hallmark to structuration theory is the idea that, in addition to individual agency, context plays a role in shaping people's decisions. Parents were left with limited and imperfect choices due to the restricted choice landscape around HS1. The four parents in this study made the best educational choice for their children in light of this restricted landscape. These parents were not passive bystanders in the process. They actively chose HS1, which the literature would suggest as irrational. These parents, however, did not act irrationally. They made choices based on the options available to them. Beyond contextual factors shaping decisions, there are internal factors or beliefs that shape parental decision-making. These beliefs are more nuanced than fine arts, athletics, special education, and after school programs, but are no less impactful in shaping parental decision-making.

### **Theme 3: Internalized Beliefs about Academic Outcomes**

In light of the limited choices available, parents in this study made the best choice available for their children. This choice, though, did not come without some trade-offs. The parents made peace with what the school had to offer academically; in other words, they did not critically evaluate the academic quality of the school. Rather, parents left it up to the children to be solely responsible for their academic success or failure. This belief in no way means that parents do not want the best educational experience and learning environment for their children. It does mean, however, that the parents interviewed for this study believed HS1 was meeting their expectations for teaching and learning and that, if their child was struggling, low performance could not be attributed to the school but to the student.

When asked about the academics at HS1, parents offered no negative feedback. Ms. King, who is an educator, understands that state standards must be taught in the classroom. Her two children were struggling academically at HS1, and she attributed their performance to their lack of commitment and motivation in school. When Ms. Johnson spoke about her daughter's struggling academic performance, she was concerned her daughter was still able to participate in band despite low academic performance. Ms. Crosson made the decision to transfer her son from one high school to HS1 after her son's persistent behavioral challenges at the other school. A perceived lack of investment at his former high school led to his transfer. Ms. Eglund did not directly mention how her grandson had been performing in school, but she did discuss that she had not gotten any calls regarding her grandson's behavior from HS1. The emphasis on their children's behavior and academic performance is admirable, but parents offered no such critique of the HS1's academic preparation and support of their children. The ostensible conclusion



from the data is parents in HS1 connect academic outcomes of their children to their children's investment in the learning at the school.

As a researcher I cannot assign value as right or wrong to the data. This theme presents further evidence that school choice is much more complex than finding a school with better academic outcomes and enrolling children in them. School choice is not one decision, but an outcome of much smaller decisions shaped by individual agency, internal beliefs, and context.

### **Summary**

The data from the four portraits in this study suggests that parents chose to enroll and keep their children enrolled in HS1 for reasons beyond academics. Despite being a low performing school, parents placed value in the co-curricular, special education, athletic, and after school programs available at HS1. These programs were important to them because they were important to their children. Beyond the after school and special programs, it was HS1 that provided the students a "home" when other schools in the area were not a good fit. All of the families in this study had some experience with school choice, and it was those negative experiences at other schools that made HS1 the most probable choice. The parents in this study did not give much attention to the academic outcomes of the school, though they all understood that the academic performance at HS1 allowed them to choose other high schools. They had no plans of leaving HS1, in part, because of a belief that the children are responsible for meeting academic expectations in the classroom. Any failure to meet the academic expectations of the school was less connected to the instruction at HS1 and more connected to the student's level of investment at the school.

Market-based theories in school choice presume that, presented with the appropriate information about school performance and about the choice process itself, parents will inevitably select schools that are higher performing (as measured by standardized assessments) rather than their home schools (Merrifield, 2001). The literature on choice assumes that as rational actors, parents would choose the school with the highest likelihood of producing higher academic outcomes for their children. For those parents and students who choose to stay in their neighborhood school, despite the availability and accessibility of information about a school's academic performance and alternative choice options that exist, the theory of rationality would argue that such a decision is non-rational. Furthermore, the literature tends to assume that parents who choose to "stay" in low performing schools have made no attempt at school choice. All of the families in this study, however, had made school choices for their children. After trying intra-district and charter schools, parents determined that HS1 was actually their school of choice. It is the place where parents believed the goals for their children would be actualized.

Assuming that parents make educational decisions solely based on academic goals is shortsighted. Parents included, but did not limit themselves to, to academic goals alone. Parents looked more broadly, wanting their children to learn about what life was like outside of high school, and the parents in this study believed HS1 provided those learning opportunities.

Structuration theory maintains that although individual agency exists in making choices, these choices are shaped, buffered, or impacted by the context in which decisions are made. This is certainly the case for the four parents involved in this study, and their choice was to enroll in HS1. The changing context of the Sunnyside community and the subsequent changes to HS1 have certainly crafted the context in which parents

make decisions. Quite frankly, changes in the local context only constrained the options from which parents could choose. It is important to note that the changes to the context did not eliminate choice; it only constrained the choice options available to parents. Notwithstanding the changes in the context, parents still made the choice to keep their children enrolled at HS1. Outside of academic performance, parental satisfaction with special education, fine arts, athletics, and after school programs were all factors that kept them at HS1. To that extent, these programs became a part of the context by which parents made the decision to remain at HS1. Overall, this study demonstrates that school choice must transcend the conventional wisdom that rational actors, when given the opportunity, would select a school with better academic outcomes for their children. School choice is a much more nuanced process and the complexities (context, academic fit, school programs, and previous experiences with choice) must also be included in the academic and policy discourse on choice. In this study parents considered their options; they found value at HS1 beyond academics, and they actively chose to keep their children enrolled at HS1. For them, HS1 was their school of choice.

In the grand scheme of things, however, these parents' choices were constrained. The choice literature assumes that all choices are "free" – that parents have an array of options of acceptable quality. In reality, these parents did not have the best options for their children: HS1 was struggling academically, yet the other options also were limiting in terms of not being a fit for their children. They did not have the time to drive their children far away to better options and, as low-income working parents, they could not afford to pay for private schools.

In light of this, parents seemed to make the best choices they could; in doing so, they placed the responsibility for the learning on the student. Their choices, unfortunately, left their children in schools with academic preparation unlikely to make

them ready for college. There were, however, co-curricular aspects (the afterschool program, athletics, and band) that parents believed prepared their children for life after high school. For the parents in this study, HS1's value was not in academic preparation for college as much as in the opportunities the school offered their children outside of the classroom.

This is consistent with structuration theory: according to structuration theory, social structures and individual agency are not mutually exclusive. In fact, these two ideas work together to lead to decision-making:

Structure, in his [Giddens'] scheme is not seen as an external force imposing its will and forcing students toward particular destinations. Rather, Giddens argues that structures are internal and encoded within the knowledge of individual actors. Structures, therefore, do not force an outcome, but serve the purpose of guiding individual decisions. (Valdez, 2008, p. 838)

Faced with relatively limited options as a result of their context, these parents became invested in the option they chose and then left it up to their children to succeed. This internalized belief that student performance and achievement is directly related to student investment overshadowed any potential interrogation of the strength of instruction at the school.

In the end, the parents' choice processes were led to further social reproduction – students were likely were not getting the best academic education at HS1 given its difficulties, though they were getting other valuable aspects of a well-rounded education that kept them in school and engaged. This finding is consistent with the major assumptions of school choice policy: because policy makers and local districts give parents choice, school choice requires parents to take responsibility for any failure. Since they chose a low performing school, despite the other things that add value to the school, parents and children become responsible for failed choice. The larger inequities are not

interrogated by anyone. To give parents an opportunity to select a higher performing school but not provide parents and families the opportunity to access these options in their community only replicates inequities that exist in urban contexts. In communities where there are few meaningful choices, parents – not policymakers – become responsible for the inequitable conditions that exist in their communities and must, unfortunately, make peace with that landscape. School choice, within itself, offers little value to communities if the school choice options themselves are not meaningful.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The two major limitations to this study are sample sizes limiting generalizability and the homogeneity of the sample. Although I was able to go in-depth with four parents, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to suggest that parents who are similarly situated consider choice the way these four families did. With portraiture, however, smaller sample sizes are encouraged since the depth in which the data is analyzed and the unique details included in the portrait share the deep complexity of the lived experiences of study participants. Through reading the portraits in the smaller sample size, it is the hope is that readers will identify themselves in the portrait and recognize the common themes that emerged in the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In addition, each of the four families in this study took a different path to HS1. The variations in their stories further reinforce the point that choice is much more nuanced than the literature would suggest and that context plays a major role in shaping the choices that parents make. Furthermore, these additional factors that parents consider when making decisions should be considered in the framework of rational choice. What is rational and what is not rational in the realm of school choice must move beyond

conventional wisdom. This study does show that rationality, and rational choice as it pertains to school choice, is much more complex than the literature suggests. Each family in this study had their own path and the decisions each parent had to make were different than the other parents, yet they all ended at HS1.

A second and equally important limitation is that all the participants in this study share similar demographic characteristics. All four of the parent participants are single African American women. Camille Wilson-Cooper (2005, 2007) has acknowledged the unique role that African American women play in the school choice policy landscape. Her study of African American women and school choice found that African American mothers seek to find their agency (which she calls motherwork) in the school choice landscape, and that their school choice decisions are a reflection of their cultural, racial, and gender identities. She interviewed mothers and grandmothers and found their participation in the school choice market served as an act of resistance to inequitable education.

Like Wilson-Cooper's (2005, 2007) work, the mothers in this study did articulate what they liked and disliked about their children's education prior to, and while currently at HS1. They acknowledged that their prior experiences with choice did not prove beneficial for their children, and in leveraging their agency and their unwillingness to be passive bystanders in their children's education process sought out other (and what they believed to be better) learning opportunities and environments for their children. In their decisions to select HS1 as the school for their children, these parents were not silent in expressing their support for HS1 or their concerns about HS1. Although there not intentionality in interviewing only African American women for this study, the study data affirm those findings of Wilson-Cooper's seminal scholarship on African American women in urban contexts and their relationship with school choice.

This study, however, could have benefitted from other voices from families with different compositions and ethnic backgrounds, which could have made the findings even more robust. Although the four women who participated in this study were representative of the majority demographic population of Southeast Houston, they are not representative of all of the families (in terms of structure and composition) in Southeast Houston. The homogeneity of the sample could also lead the reader to believe or assume that single African American women are monolithic and make decisions the same way and assign value to the same things. It will be essential to include parents from diverse demographic backgrounds to expand on this work and to deepen the understanding around what factors do parents find valuable in a schools in urban contexts.

#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The findings from this study overwhelmingly suggest that choice is more nuanced than what is espoused in current research. In addition to continuing the work of this study, it is going to be important that policy makers lean on the school choice research that includes the voices of students and parents when making local and state policies and decisions related to school choice. Policymakers should be uncomfortable with relying on the idea that academics alone persuade parents to opt-in to school choice. This study suggests parents, particularly parents in urban contexts, consider the *whole* student when deciding which school is best for their children. It is not academics alone who persuade parents to make choices. The rigid neoliberal perspective of rational choice as purely focused on test scores should be abandoned and more room should be made to explore how students and families in urban contexts *fit* at their schools. That is, which programs or activities at the school meet the needs of students and families? This question would

suggest a deeper consideration of the holistic and complex factors that families value when selecting a school, characteristics that extend beyond academic outcomes.

Moreover, policymakers who advocate for school choice should seek out and learn from families who have participated in choice but decide to go back to their neighborhood school. In this study, all of the parents had made some sort of choice but ultimately decided HS1, the neighborhood school, was the best option for their children. There are two important lessons from this. First, school choice, in and of itself is, not a one dimensional or linear process. In other words, parents do not make a choice to leave their neighborhood school, never to return. Rather, school choice is a series or set of decisions in which parents make a choice and evaluate the outcomes of such choice. Should the choice parents make yield results that parents determine to be negative, then parents will make another school choice, until they become satisfied. As such it is as equally important to learn why a family chooses to return to their neighborhood school as it is to create opportunities for those same families to choose to leave their neighborhood school. After learning what is most important to families in selecting a school, it is critical to provide parents with a wide array viable of options.

Second, and perhaps most important, decision makers must learn from community members the value neighborhood schools add to the community. In this particular study, it was not academic performance that attracted families to the HS1; it was special programs, athletics, and afterschool activities that created student and parent investment. In this study, HS1 is a part of the fabric of the Sunnyside community. Failure to acknowledge the neighborhood school's role in shaping the community when contemplating the introduction or expansion of school choice in an urban context is irresponsible and devalues the impact that the neighborhood school had in shaping the community. This does not mean that historical impact of the neighborhood school should



exempt it from critical evaluation of its academic performance. It is important that low performing schools be supported in improving instruction, but it is as equally important to focus on the value that the neighborhood school provides to its students and to its community.

School choice has been a policy solution for low performing schools for over 40 years, and there are no signs that school choice options are going to be restricted. In fact, we see school choice policies and options expanding. It is primarily in urban contexts that school choice programs are proposed and debated. This study not only affirms the role of the neighborhood school in urban contexts; it also suggests that neighborhood schools play an important role in providing an option that can align to the needs and values of parents and families in urban contexts. This does not mean that neighborhood schools or even school choice programs/policies should have no accountability to parents as it relates to academic preparation. As the findings from this study suggest, schools (either neighborhood or school of choice) should be evaluated for academic performance *and* components that support the development of the *whole* student.

## **Appendix A: Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

*Assigned school:* The school the student is assigned to based on district attendance boundaries. Assigned schools are based on students' permanent mailing addresses that align with a corresponding "feeder pattern" (Houston Independent School District, 2012).

*Non-chooser:* Not to be confused with non-admit (Rosenbloom, 2010). These are families enrolled in their assigned school despite a history of academic performance.

*Low Performing School:* Schools identified in their second consecutive year by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to be academically unacceptable (AU). Reasons for AU ratings include not meeting benchmarks for state standardized assessments and/or high school graduation rates (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

## **Appendix B: Explanation of the Texas Education Agency Low-Performance Sanctions (Before 2013 and 2014-current)**

### **EXPLANATION OF TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY LOW-PERFORMANCE SANCTIONS (2013 AND PRIOR YEARS)**

The Title 1 School Improvement **Stage 1** requirements are as follows:

- The school must develop/revise a two-year school improvement campus plan;
- The school must notify parents of campus school improvement status;
- The school must incorporate strategies based on scientifically based research that will strengthen core academic subjects;
- The school must incorporate a teacher mentoring program;
- The school must specify the responsibilities of the school and the local education agency;
- The **school district must offer school choice, and transportation** must be provided; and
- The school district must establish a peer review process to provide assistance to the campus.

The Title 1 School Improvement **Stage 2** requirements are as follows:

- Stage 1 campus and district improvement activities continue, and
- Supplemental Education Services must be offered to eligible students on the campus no later than the first day of the school year.

The Title 1 School Improvement **Stage 3** requirements are as follows:

- Stage 2 Improvement activities continue;
- The school district must implement one of the following corrective actions:
  - Replace the school staff relevant to not meeting AYP,
  - Implement curricular and staff development activities,
  - Significantly decrease management authority at the campus,
  - Appoint an outside expert adviser to the campus,
  - Extend the school year or school day of the campus, or
  - Restructure the organization of the campus; and
- The school district must publish and disseminate information regarding corrective action.

The Title 1 School Improvement **Stage 4** requirements are as follows:

- The school district must continue to offer school choice, technical assistance, and supplemental education services to eligible students;

- The school district must prepare a plan and make necessary arrangements to implement one of the following options:
  - Reopen the school as a charter school,
  - Replace principal and staff,
  - Contract with a private management company,
  - State takeover, or other major restructuring of campus governance

The Title 1 School Improvement **Stage 5** requirements are as follows:

- The school district must continue to offer school choice, technical assistance, and supplemental education services to eligible students.
- The school district must implement the plan identified in Stage 4 and make necessary arrangements to implement one of the following options:
  - Reopen the school as a charter school,
  - Replace principal and staff,
  - Contract with a private management company, or
  - State takeover, or other major restructuring of campus governance must occur.

Information above information is from the Houston Independent School District (2012a).

## EXPLANATION OF SANCTIONS FOR HISD (2014-CURRENT)

Framework for *Improvement Required* Campus-Level Interventions\*

Level of Concern	Basic Activities	Campus Action	Addresses
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the Campus Intervention Team (CIT)</li> <li>Implement the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS), including</li> <li>Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and</li> <li>Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the targeted Improvement Plan</li> </ul> <p><i>(Texas Education Code (TEC) §39.106)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Propose CIT Members [Professional Service Provider (PSP) and District Coordinator of School Improvement (DCSI)]</li> <li>CIT and Campus Leadership Team (CLT) Implement the TAIS</li> <li>Present Improvement Plan in a Public Hearing and for Board Approval</li> <li>Submit Improvement Plan to TEA for Approval</li> <li>CLT Monitors Progress and Completes Quarterly Progress Reports</li> <li>CIT Monitors Progress and Submits PSP Progress Reports</li> </ul>	Low Performance Identified by the Performance Index Framework and, as appropriate, the System Safeguard Annual Measureable Objectives and Targets
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the CIT</li> <li>Implement the TAIS including Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and</li> <li>Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the targeted Improvement Plan and a Reconstitution Plan</li> </ul> <p><i>TEC §39.106-107 and 19 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §97.1063</i></p>	<p>All intervention actions required of a 1<sup>st</sup> Year campus in addition to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CLT and CIT Submit Proposed Reconstitution Plan to TEA for Approval</li> </ul>	Ongoing Low Performance Identified by the Performance Index Framework and, as appropriate, the System Safeguard Annual Measureable Objectives and Targets; Campus Reconstitution
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the CIT</li> <li>Implement the TAIS including Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and</li> <li>Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the targeted Improvement Plan and approved Reconstitution Plan</li> </ul> <p><i>(TEC §39.106-107) Hearing before the Commissioner of Education (TEC §39.103)</i></p>	<p>All intervention actions required of a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year campus in addition to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal, Superintendent, and Board President Participate in Hearing Before the Commissioner of Education</li> </ul>	Ongoing Low Performance Identified by the Performance Index Framework and, as appropriate, the System Safeguard Annual Measureable Objectives and Targets; Campus Reconstitution
4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> Year and/or Imminent Concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the CIT</li> <li>Implement the TAIS, including</li> <li>Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and</li> <li>Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the targeted Improvement Plan</li> <li>Additional Sanctions Determined by the Commissioner</li> </ul> <p><i>(TEC §39.106-107)</i></p>	<p>All intervention actions required of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year campus in addition to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement Additional Sanctions Determined by the Commissioner</li> </ul>	Ongoing, Substantial Concern Related to Low Performance Identified by the Performance Index Framework and, as appropriate, the System Safeguard Annual Measureable Objectives and Targets
6 <sup>th</sup> Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the CIT</li> <li>Implement the TAIS, including</li> <li>Data Analysis, Needs Assessment, and</li> <li>Development, Implementation, and Monitoring of the targeted Improvement Plan</li> <li>Implement Requirements of TEC §39.107(e)-(r) and 19 TAC §97.1065 <i>Repurposing, Alternative Management, or Closure, per Commissioner Order</i></li> </ul>	All intervention actions required of a 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> Year and/or Imminent Concern Year campus	Imminent and Substantial Ongoing Low Performance and Program Concerns, and, as appropriate, low performance on the System Safeguard Annual Measureable Objectives

\*Requirement that 3<sup>rd</sup> year IR campuses open as a reconstituted campus is suspended for 2013-2014 due to no accountability ratings being issued in 2012; all schools required to reconstitute based on 2011 ratings were required to open as reconstituted campuses in 2012-2013. Additional sanctions under TEC §39.103, §39.104, and/or §39.109 will be utilized as necessary on a case-by-case basis.

NOTE: Based on the outcome of continuing waiver conversations with the USDE, Title I campuses that miss system safeguard annual measureable objectives and targets may be required to engage in additional intervention requirements

Table from Texas Education Agency (2016).

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