

How Do Parents Engage in School-Choice Decisions?

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Dedication

Curtis Mpho-Amir Valentine and Ivy Noelle Valentine, mommy began this journey before she knew you existed. The process of completing this dissertation and working everyday has come with many sacrifices of time and resources away from you that we can never get back. Therefore, this fruit of my labor and your love is dedicated to you for loving me unconditionally even when I couldn't be there for you. I love you dearly with all of my heart, and I thank God everyday that he allowed me to be your mommy. I hope and pray that my perseverance through this experience serves as an example and inspiration for you to press toward achieving greater things than I've dreamed for myself. Set goals and dream big and remember to never give up on them. You can accomplish anything that you work hard for and set your mind and heart to do.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

How Do Parents Engage in School-Choice Decisions?

This qualitative study explored how parents make school-choice decisions. I conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study to collect and analyze data. I used criterion purposeful sampling to determine participants who met the criteria for this study: (a) parents who currently had students at schools of choice, and (b) parents who were entering the educational marketplace for the first time. The study used participant interviews as the primary source of data collection to develop a deeper understanding of parents' experiences and decision making regarding school choice.

The following research questions guided the research: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children? How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children? How do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences? The experiences of the parents unfolded through a semistructured interview protocol that used open-ended questions. Several themes emerged during the interview process: expectations, access, experiences, responsibility, and decision making. I coded and analyzed the experiences shared by the parents. The data collected indicate that parents factor in many reasons and characteristics when making school-choice decisions for their children, reasons spread along continuums of academics, personal convenience, and personality and characteristics of the child. I pieced together the common themes of each individual experience like pieces of a puzzle to paint a picture that had never been shared.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Parents, as consumers of education, make school choices for their children; parents enter the educational marketplace to set goals, to seek information, to evaluate prospective schools, and to select their preferred schools (Cooper, 2005). In 2003, an estimated 15% of children attended schools of choice rather than their assigned schools (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). Parents of an estimated one quarter of all students in Grades 1 through 12 moved to their current neighborhoods for the schools, thereby suggesting greater exercise of choice by these parents than by the parents of the 15% of students attending non-assigned schools (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). These parents carefully chose a suitable school for their children, expending considerable resources in terms of time and money in the process (Chakrabarti & Roy, 2010). One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children's education is through choosing the school they attend, which often results in finding alternatives to traditional publicly provided schools. Parents enter the educational marketplace for different reasons.

Parents enter the educational marketplace with differing values, beliefs, information, and resources (Cooper, 2005). Elacqua, Schneider, and Buckley (2006) noted that, contrary to what critics of choice have argued, parents almost never mention non-educational dimensions (with the exception of location), such as daycare and extracurricular activities. Despite the importance that researchers, policymakers, and teacher unions have given to class and school size as goals for education reform (Michel

& Rothstein, 2002; Viadero, 2001), very few parents say this is important in their choice of a school. Education reform has affected parents' perspectives regarding school choice.

According to Lamdin and Mintrom (1997), education reform, with regard to school choice, can be defined as any policy that is designed to reduce the constraints that current school configurations placed on schools, students, and parents. Schools of choice apply for and receive exemptions from many bureaucratic rules and regulations governing traditional public schools to create innovative accountability relationships with the schools' teachers and parents (Hill, Lake, Celio, Campbell, Herdman, & Bulkley, 2001). The performance of schools of choice depends heavily on high-performing teachers and the schools' ability to attract and satisfy engaged parents (Hill et al., 2001). Schools of choice will continue to be a necessity until schools become more responsive to the needs and interests of parents and students by providing different programs for different families.

Expanding school choice is one of the major themes of current education reform initiatives (Elacqua et al., 2006). Educational and political groups have cited market-based school-choice reform as having the potential to improve public schools while offering new choices to parents and students who have long been denied important educational liberties (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Vitteritti, 1999). Governments have decided that giving parents more options to choose among schools is an appropriate policy response to local educational problems (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006). Green and Winters (2008) examined the impact of the McKay program on students who remained in the public school system. The researchers found statistically significant increases in the test scores of students with disabilities who

remained in the public system, as more private schools entered the McKay Program, suggesting that schools were serving those students better when faced with more competition from the McKay program (Green & Winters, 2008). The researchers asserted that vouchers do not drain public schools of their ability to serve disabled students; instead, schools are pushed to serve those students better (Green & Winters, 2008). Providing parents with school-choice options offers educational freedom and initiates competitive pressure between schools, with hopes to improve public school quality.

Heise (2001) cited four factors that contribute to the development of an intellectual and political foundation upon which many school-choice policy discussions rest. The first was the 1962 publication of Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman's work advancing the idea that parental choice and market mechanisms with regard to education are better able to generate personal and social good than government regulation. Second was the publication of *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, in which Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that political and market controls operate differently in the education context and that these differences help explain private schools' comparative advantages over their public counterparts. Third, traditional liberals, including some prominent members of the education establishment, began publicly to embrace school-choice policies, including the use of publicly funded education vouchers. Finally, the fourth contribution has been the growth of privately funded voucher programs since the 1990s (Heise, 2001).

School-Choice Arguments

School-choice opponents frequently have asserted that large-scale school-choice policies will destroy public education and exacerbate differences between the educational haves and have nots (Heise, 2001; Henig, 1994; Levin, 1998). If families are granted a choice, what happens if they choose schools along racial, ethnic, or religious lines (Heise, 2001)? Until the mid-19th century, families chose from among a variety of autonomous schools and homeschooling. Tax-funded public schools gradually displaced tuition-charging independent schools, considerably raising the price of choice. To exercise choice, a family needed to buy a home in a neighborhood with a good school or pay independent school tuition in addition to taxation that supported public schools (Kafer, 2009). For more than a century, few opportunities existed for middle- and low-income families. A persistent fear is that such choices will lead to more racially distinctive schools (Weiher & Tedin, 2002). The fear that White students, students who are more gifted academically, and students from households commanding the greatest educational resources will flee the traditional public schools for schools of choice (Goldhaber, 1999; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). School-choice policies might unwind decades of school integration efforts and fuel increased socioeconomic isolation (Heise, 2001).

Providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socioeconomic background and generate greater inequities across education systems (OECD, 2012). Choice programs can be designed and managed to balance choice while limiting its negative impact on equity (OECD, 2012). There are different options possible: introducing controlled choice schemes can combine parental choice and ensure a more diverse distribution of students (OECD, 2012). In addition, to ensure balance,

incentives to make disadvantaged students attractive to high quality schools, school selection mechanisms and vouchers or tax credits can be alternative options (OECD, 2012). Policies also are required to improve disadvantaged families' access to information about schools and to support them in making informed choices (OECD, 2012).

Homeschooling is a school-choice option often considered by parents. Merry and Karsten (2010) examined three prominent arguments that might be brought against homeschooling: It aggravates social inequality, it worsens societal conflict, and it works against the best interests of children. Much strong resistance to homeschooling has arisen. Opponents of homeschooling believe that compulsory attendance laws in public school settings safeguard children's interests by ensuring an adequate level of education necessary for functioning in society and contributing to its economic stability. Liberal critics of homeschooling typically focus on its lack of public accountability. Oversight of some kind is believed necessary to curtail privatization tendencies that threaten not only social cohesion and equality of opportunity but also an erosion of good citizenship and public reasonableness (Merry & Karsten, 2010).

The Boston Teachers Union (BTU), which initially helped to devise and implement the plan for pilot schools, has since prevented, or slowed, the opening of new pilot schools due to various concerns raised by its members (Knoester, 2011). Before pilot schools were created, the BTU bargained for School Site Councils, or governance boards empowered with authority over crucial decisions at the school level and which were made up of teachers, parents, community members, and principals (BTU/BSC, 1994; Pearlman, 2000).

Teacher unions nationwide are especially fierce in their opposition to measures that would alter the bargaining environment by introducing authentic competition among schools and districts or promoting a focus on efficiency (Hess & West, 2006). New financial reporting documents available from the U.S. Department of Labor show that in 2004 the AFT contributed \$550,000 and the NEA \$45,000 to the Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank that regularly issues reports and policy briefs critical of charter schools and vouchers (Hess & West, 2006).

Out of many different deregulated schools, charter schools are the least supportive in providing teachers with sustainable working conditions and employee rights (Johnson & Landman, 2000). Even though charter schools were founded as places where autonomy and innovation would flourish, the flexibility granted to charter school operators has not automatically been extended to teachers (Johnson & Landman, 2000). Because the power in charter schools goes to the board and the principal, the teachers have no guarantees about the nature of their workplace and whether it would be fair, responsive, and supportive (Johnson & Landman, 2000).

The experiences of teachers in the charter school organization examined by Johnson and Landman (2000) demonstrate that, although teachers bought into the promise of choice, they were unable to gain the privileges associated with that choice. The teachers in the study chose to form a union and faced backlash from their governing board. In the Johnson and Landman (2000) study, when teachers questioned their working conditions, it fueled a suspicion that undermined the teachers' loyalty to the organization.

Proponents of school choice argue that school-choice policies will improve educational quality for many students, especially those most in need (Heise, 2001). According to Buckley (2007), schools of choice build stronger parent communities. Proponents of homeschooling argue that education routinely occurs outside schools (Merry & Karsten, 2010). Homeschooler advocates frequently remind their critics that schooling and education are not the same; there are many sites of education that facilitate learning, discovery, and growth, including libraries, business sites, and the outdoors (Merry & Karsten, 2010). Schools of choice (such as magnet-based choice) are supported as a way to expand school choice for parents, bring innovation through specialty schools and programs, and promote voluntary forms of racial integration (Archbald, 2004). Some supporters contend that this form of public school choice is especially helpful to lower income parents, who are trapped in inferior inner-city schools; whereas detractors have claimed that magnet schools may worsen stratification in school districts (Archbald, 2004).

School choice has proven to have effects far beyond student outcomes, integrated classrooms, and quality schools. According to Deming (2012), winning the lottery for admission to a preferred school at the high school level reduces the total number of felony arrests and the social cost of crime. Further, among middle school students, winning a school-choice lottery reduces the social cost of crime and the number of days of incarceration. Deming cited four possible explanations for the reduction in crime among high-risk lottery winners. First, incapacitation advances the notion that winning the lottery entails longer bus rides to and from school, thus occupying youth during high-crime hours. Second, contagion indicates that winning the lottery prevents crime by

removing high-risk youth from crime-prone peers or neighborhoods. Third, the reduction in crime is related to the skills students gain by attending a higher quality school. Fourth, peer networks formed in middle or high school have a persistent influence on adult criminality. Deming asserted that winning a lottery for admission to a school of choice greatly reduces criminal activity and that the greatest reduction occurs among youth at the highest risk for committing crimes.

School Choice and Race

In the middle of the 20th century, school choice as an education policy flourished in the South, principally as a tool of White resistance to federal court desegregation efforts (Heise, 2001). During the 1980s and 1990s, choice was a policy lever designed to increase racial integration in schools, through magnet schools and intra-district transfer policies (Heise, 2001).

A comparison of the characteristics of the traditional public schools that choosers leave with the characteristics of the charter schools they choose indicated that race is a good predictor of the choices that choosing households make (Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Although no group of respondents indicated that it was important to them that their children attend schools with children who are predominantly of the same racial or ethnic group, African Americans and Latinos transferred into charter schools in which their groups comprised between 11% and 14% more of the student body than the traditional public schools they were leaving (Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

Wells and Crain (1997) found that higher status groups have greater cultural capital and fewer market constraints, thereby providing an advantage over the poor in a choice system. Despite this social class creaming, there has been relatively strong

evidence supporting choice as an effective tool to achieve racial and ethnic desegregation with some controlled choice plans (Rossell & Clarke, 1988).

Statement of the Problem

The vast amount of school-choice research has left unheard parents' voices regarding why and how they engage in the educational marketplace. Current school-choice literature has not accounted adequately for the decision making, values, or beliefs of parents. Much of the research has presumed that parents make well-informed decisions about schools based on traditional school quality indicators, such as test scores and student achievement (Cooper, 2005). The literature on actual parent choice behavior is sparse and has been limited to surveys of stated parental preferences and other empirical studies (DeArmond, Jochim, & Lake, 2014; Elacqua et al., 2006; Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). According to Elacqua et al., parents say they choose schools for academic reasons and few admit to being concerned about the racial or class composition with studies of the student body. Research on school choice has examined the racial differences in the overall student body composition of schools of choice versus the assigned district-boundary schools (Garcia, 2007).

Parents consider specific factors when making school choices for their children (Cooper, 2005). Most educational systems require that parents send their children to a school within the district of residence and within home boundaries, sometimes with an elite private system coexisting alongside (Sliwka & Istance, 2006). In an attempt to promote diversity and establish room for exercise of parental choice, many changes have taken place with parental demand as an important factor (Bell, 2009a, 2009b; Sliwka & Istance, 2006). Most recent proposals on school reform have sought to shift power to

parents, thereby bringing new actors into the educational decision process (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998). As these reforms have proceeded, concern has been growing that different types of parents' values about education will lead to stratification and segregation in the schools (Koedel, Betts, Rice & Zau, 2009; Schneider et al., 1998). Critics insist that policies promoting choice imply acceptance that some students will enjoy a better education than others and that market principles have made their way into the public enterprise of schooling (Koedel et al., 2009; Sliwka & Istance, 2006). Advocates regard school choice as a route to higher quality through the injection of enhanced competition, healthy reflection of the principles of sensitivity to demand, and diversity into the uniformity of education systems (Burke, 2014; Koedel et al., 2009; Green & Winters, 2008; Sliwka & Istance, 2006).

Although there is extensive research on school choice, these studies fall short of providing insight into how parents negotiate the school-choice process for their children. The current body of research on parents and school choice tends to be limited with regard to policy and does not consider that parents' decision making can be subjective, emotional, and culturally specific. Researchers have not considered the impact of the experiences parents have had with school choice and how they navigate their decision making. This study addressed the lack of consideration given to parents' voice with regard to how they negotiate the school-choice process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how parents engage in the educational marketplace to make school choices for their children. This study sought to identify the factors parents consider as they make choices and how they engage in the

decision-making process to determine the best choices for their children. I sought to understand how parents make sense of and construct their school choices. I wanted educators and administrators to value parents as consumers in the educational marketplace because the competitive nature of the educational marketplace contributes to its being divisive and oppressive, and in turn, fails to empower marginalized parent groups (Henig, 1994; Levin, 1991; Parker & Margonis, 1996).

There is a lack of literature on the decision-making process that parents undertake to make school choices for their children. Literature that is available generally focuses on the educational factors that influence parents' decisions (Bell, 2009a, 2009b; Cooper, 2005, 2007; Wilkins, 2011) or its methodology is quantitative. Little research has focused on how parents make school-choice decisions for their children.

I explored how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make decisions regarding school choice for their children. The goal was to better understand a parent's perspective of school-choice making. This study intended to place necessary pressure on educational administrators, teachers, and staff to be more “consumer friendly” (Buckley, 2007). Hassel (1999) suggested that educational systems cannot take their “customers” for granted. The educational systems' survival depends on the degree to which families believe the schools are responding to family preferences and working hard to provide the education they demand.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? There were three subquestions related to the main research question:

1. What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children?
2. How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children?
3. How do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences?

Other studies have approached this question by focusing only on parents who have already engaged in the educational marketplace. This study focused on both parents who had not yet made the decision to engage in the educational marketplace as well as those who were active participants. Further, other studies have tended to describe the factors that influence a parent's decision, whereas this study focused on how parents reflect upon and consider school-choice options that help them attain the desired educational experiences for their children.

Statement of Potential Significance

Parents make decisions about school choice for different reasons (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Michel & Rothstein, 2002; Viadero, 2001). A few factors that some parents consider include race, special programs, and geographical location as factors of school choice (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Michel & Rothstein, 2002; Viadero, 2001).

Parents' demand for certain types of schooling characteristics influences what schools supply (Cooper, 2005). Schools compete to attract parent consumers because they need the parents to choose them to remain open and viable (Cooper, 2005).

Promarket advocates further insist that the competitive nature of the market, which results from supply and demand forces, benefits consumers by providing a range of

quality schools from which to choose, including those that suit their children's needs (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1991; Vitteritti, 1999).

A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates the many positive benefits of providing choice in education (Burke, 2014). Instead of policies to increase spending on the public education system, states and local school districts would better serve students by empowering parents with control over their share of education funding (Burke, 2014).

If leaders want to make school choice work for all families, they need more than just studies of whether charter or voucher programs are outperforming district schools; they need to know whether their city's overall supply of schools is getting better quickly, and whether parents are happy with their choices and can navigate them easily. Leaders need a broader understanding of what's actually happening where school choice has moved from the margins to the mainstream, including the opportunities and challenges choice brings and under what conditions. (DeArmond et al., 2014, p. 1)

The ability of educators to understand the perspectives of parents could promote discussion about parents' school choices and how they navigate the educational marketplace to identify parents' needs while helping them find the resources to meet those needs and understanding what parents want for their children. One putative outcome of school choice is the transformation of parents from passive clients of a government service to active partners entitled to a say in how schools are run and how students are taught (Buckley, 2007). The researcher anticipates that as a result of her being able to better explain parents' interactions with schools of choice, educators will gain a greater understanding of how to provide parents with what they want: quality and diverse schools. Knowing the characteristics of choosers and their response to various design features is essential for policymakers to be able to design programs to ensure equity and access (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I examined how parents navigate through school-choice decision making. I used three theories as an interpretive lens to guide the study: parental role construction, which describes how parents make decisions to become involved in their children's education; parental self-efficacy, which refers to parents' perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated levels (Bandura, 1977); and, rational choice theory, a decision-making mechanism that takes into account all of the considerations available and determines the best solution given these factors, one that works the same way in all circumstances (Schulz, 2011).

Parental role construction theory. Parents' ideas about their roles in children's education are important to understanding their thinking and decisions about involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Lareau, 1989). Hoover-Dempsey, Wilkins, Sandler, & O'Connor (2004) described parental role construction as one of the constructs critical to parents' decisions about involvement in their children's education. Parental role construction for involvement may best be defined as parental beliefs about what one is supposed to do, as a parent, in relation to the child's education and the behaviors characteristically enacted in service of these beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2004).

The literature on parental involvement in children's education suggests that parental role construction frames what parents believe they are supposed to do with regard to their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Levine, 2000; Mahler, 1997). In a 1997 case study, Mahler explored parents' perceptions of their role in education and how these perceptions translate into specific parent involvement

practices at home and school. Through focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews of 12 parents of African American students, Mahler found parents to be more effective when able to distinguish between the educational responsibilities of families and schools.

Parents' personal ideas as well as ideas of important others about the goals of children's education influence parental role beliefs and behaviors (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2004; Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997; Levine, 2000; Mahler, 1997). Parental role beliefs also are influenced by personal observations of, and interactions with, others who hold responsibilities related to children's educational outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2004). The works of these authors support the model suggesting that parental role construction fills specific functions in the parental decision-making process.

Parental self-efficacy. Parents become involved because they have a sense of personal efficacy for helping their children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). The researchers defined parent efficacy as "parents' beliefs about their general ability to influence their child's developmental and educational outcomes, about their own influence relative to that of peers and the child's teacher" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 19). Bandura (1997) suggested that an efficacy expectation is the belief that one can successfully execute a behavior required to produce desired outcomes. Efficacy expectations are major determinants of the activities people choose, the effort they expend, and how long they sustain effort when faced with stressful situations (Bandura, 1977).

Parental self-efficacy beliefs refer to parents' expectations of whether they are able to competently and effectively perform as parents (Lupiani, 2004). For parents to

feel efficacious, they must view themselves as possessing knowledge of appropriate child care responsibilities, feel confident in their abilities to carry out such tasks, and hold the belief that their children will respond contingently and that others will be supportive of their efforts (Coleman & Karraker, 1997). A sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school enables parents to believe that their involvement will be positively associated with children's learning and school performance and, ultimately, to act in relation to their children's schooling (Bandura, 1977; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997).

Rational choice theory. Rational choice theory (RCT) is the idea that individuals make choices to maximize benefit while minimizing cost (Martinas & Reguly, 2013). RCT is about what activity to choose (Martinas & Reguly, 2013). The best choice is selected based upon the expected result of the activity, taking into consideration the form of action and its details (Martinas & Reguly, 2013). When making a decision, individuals first weigh the expected positive benefits against the expected negative consequences, and then they base their choice on what they think will ultimately benefit them the most (Martinas & Reguly, 2012).

Schulz (2011) described three major interpretations of RCT: normative interpretations—in which the theory is seen to express necessary conditions concerning how people ought to choose; predictive interpretations—in which the theory is seen to provide an instrumentally useful set of claims for the prediction of the actions of individuals or groups; and, descriptive interpretations—in which the theory is seen to describe the psychological processes that are actually going on when people make decisions. For the purposes of this study, the descriptive interpretation will be

highlighted, focusing on the considerations parents take into account when making school-choice decisions.

Schulz (2011) explained that decision making is based on a psychological mechanism that takes into account all of the considerations available to the agent, tries to determine the best solution, given these considerations, and works the same way in all circumstances. An earlier writer stated,

Conscious decision-making is a demanding process; deciding to decide, gathering the necessary information, weighing the information and making a choice are all burdensome even when all that is at stake is laundry detergent. A serious decision, like the choice of medical care or education for one's child, demands much more of a person. (De Jarnatt, 2007, p. 12)

I used parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and rational choice theory as a theoretical lens to examine how parents engage in the educational marketplace. Through interviews with parents, the researcher sought to understand how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban-suburban county make decisions regarding school choice for their children.

Summary of Methodology

According to Silverman (2000), qualitative research is concerned with exploring people's life history and everyday behavior. Merriam (2002) concurred with this line of thinking and noted that qualitative research designs seek to understand the perceptions people have about their world, their experiences, and the way they make sense of their experiences. To develop a deeper understanding of parents' experiences and decision making regarding school choice, I used a basic interpretive qualitative study as outlined by Merriam to collect and analyze data. "A basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative study exemplifies all the characteristics of qualitative research... the researcher is

interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, this meaning is mediated through the researcher instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive” (Merriam, 2002, p. 37). Interviews of parent participants about their experiences with school choice were the primary method of data collection during this qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research allows the researcher to use the experiences of the participants to explain a particular phenomenon. For the purpose of this study, I used criterion purposeful sampling of a socioeconomically and racially diverse population. I collected participants’ demographic data, including age, gender, race, education level, employment status, marital status, number of children, and grade band of each child.

Delimitations. This research study has delimitations due to the following criterion:

1. All participants were parents or primary caregivers of school-aged children, who were responsible for making decisions regarding the students’ school-choice options.
2. Participants were presently considering entering the educational marketplace or had considered doing so in the past.
3. Parents voluntarily shared their experiences related to school-choice decision making.
4. I chose participants through the filter of a local church and attached preschool.

By setting parameters, I provided a framework for an open accounting of the participants’ experiences with school-choice decision making, adding additional insight to the school-choice decision-making process.

Limitations. This study was subject to the following limitations:

1. I am a parent of two students.
2. I am employed as an assistant principal.
3. I participate on panels to review applications for charter schools.
4. I am a member of an education task force that seeks to retain the students that the public school system has lost to schools outside the public school system.
5. I have engaged in making school-choice decisions for my children.
6. I am very familiar with the school district in which the study takes place.

Qualitative researchers recognize that their constructions influence their understandings of participants' experiences and reflect upon their constructions to guide their research (Heppner, Kivlighan & Wampold, 1999). A limitation of this study was the researcher's ability to separate personal experiences and positionalities from the experiences of the participants. The researcher's goal was to objectively collect data from participants through interviews and to objectively analyze all data collected and report findings reasonably without bias or influence.

There was the potential for researcher bias; however, the use of epoché and bracketing (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Moustakas, 1994) controlled for potential bias. More details regarding epoché and bracketing are disclosed in Chapter 3. Qualitative research primarily relies on interviews for the collection of data (Heppner et al., 1999; Merriam, 1998, 2002; Morse & Richards, 2002; Silverman, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yin, 2003). Another limitation of this study was that qualitative research relies on participants' reporting their experiences truthfully during interviews.

The final limitation for this study was the necessity for the researcher to rely solely on the reconstructed memory of parents whose children were currently in schools of choice; despite their current experiences with the educational marketplace they should have been able to explain the experiences they had when they first began negotiating the school-choice process. This phenomenon was problematic because reconstructed memory and the ability to distort are contributing factors in research.

Definition of Concepts and Key Terms

The following terms are used in this study:

Education marketplace – a figurative term used to describe a place where parents go to gather resources to identify the best school-choice options for their children.

School choice – label given to a wide array of programs offering students and their families alternatives to traditional publicly provided schools, to which students are generally assigned according to the location of their family residence.

School-choice process – the act of entering an enrollment lottery, completing applications, sitting for entrance exams, interviewing, et cetera for the school of choice.

Schools of choice – charter schools (public and nonpublic), home school, specialty programs (academies, International Baccalaureate, language immersion, middle college, Montessori, science and technology, single-sex, performing arts, private schools (religious and secular).

Self-Efficacy – one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or to accomplish a task.

Social Networks - a network of social interactions and personal relationships.

Chapter Summary

This study of how parents engage in the educational marketplace and construct their school choices comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of current arguments regarding school choice and the role these arguments have played in school-choice policy. Chapter 2 presents a literature review examining the factors that influence school choice, barriers to school choice, and misconceptions of school choice making. Chapter 3 includes information regarding the research approach, the theoretical perspective, the research design, credibility, and research ethics. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study as revealed through the analysis of the data collected, and Chapter 5 presents a summary of the findings related to recent research literature and implications for practice and research on how parents navigate the school-choice process.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Offering parents more freedom and the potential to improve public school quality, school choice has been a popular reform approach since the 1980s (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006; Zhang & Cowen, 2009). What parents prefer regarding the education of their children is likely more than good test scores, although that is part of a set of preferences (Bell, 2009a, 2009b; Buckley, 2007; Fossey, 1994; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Because choices about education do not occur in a vacuum, families make tradeoffs between preferences and constraints (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Holme, 2002; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). The supply of available schools likely influences parental preferences and their ability to act on them (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008).

This chapter presents a critical review of research and theoretical literature pertinent to this study of school choice and how parents make school-choice decisions. The chapter begins with a brief review of the literature examining factors that influence choice. Second, the study considers barriers to school choice. Last, misconceptions of school choice are identified in the research literature.

Methods of Literature Review

The literature review includes sources from 2000 to 2015. I used keywords such as school choice, enrollment, lotteries, parent(al) involvement, parent participation, education reform, charter schools, magnet schools, boundary schools, student achievement, academic achievement, student success, student outcomes, teacher unions, and decision making to search for literature. To provide a narrower search, I combined

words such as school choice and parental involvement, perceptions and school choice, education reform and parents, and arguments and school choice. I also searched many authors whose names were often found in literature on school choice, and collected literature related to this topic between February 2013 and August 2014.

A search for the literature on parent involvement included frequent Internet searches. I used Google as an informal Internet search engine. Formal in-depth searches used educational and scientific databases. This study combines literature from empirical studies, opinion papers, conference papers, policy papers, and editorial articles. The body of knowledge that contributed to this literature review was taken from several references and sources, including ALADIN, Dissertation Abstracts International, EBSCO Host, Education Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC), Ovid, ProQuest, annotated bibliographies, and reference lists from dissertations, master's theses, journal articles, and recently published books by researchers in the fields of education, sociology, and psychology.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study emerged from the research literature on parents and school choice. From traditional boundary schools to magnet programs and charter schools, the prolific research on school choice has described an evolution in the roles of parents.

Parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and rational choice theory provide explanations behind school-choice decision making and the purpose for engaging in school-choice decision making. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) model of the parental involvement process suggests that parental role construction frames what parents

believe they are supposed to do with regard to their children's education. In essence, it is their job description from their viewpoint. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners have suggested for some time that parents' ideas about their roles in children's education are important to understanding their thinking and decisions about involvement (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Lareau, 1989).

Self-efficacy for helping their children succeed in school refers to parents' beliefs about whether or not their involvement is likely to have a positive influence on their children's education. Parents' sense of self-efficacy shapes what they do. Parents become involved because they have a sense of personal efficacy for influencing their child's developmental and educational outcomes. It is this sense of efficacy for helping children succeed in school that enables parents to believe that their involvement will positively affect their children's learning and school performance.

Rational choice theory (RCT) relies on the premise that when making a decision, individuals first weigh the expected positive benefits against the expected negative consequences, and then base their choice on what they think will ultimately benefit them the most. Advocates of choice sometimes suggest that choosing increases the level of control that individuals, agents, consumers, and citizens in general have over the outcomes (Ben-Porath, 2009). Ben-Porath wrote,

The question of how the process of choosing occurs should be considered for the purpose of informing policies that respond to the normative demand for choice. Clearly choice is bound by the context in which it occurs, and limited by the forms of rationality that the individual can utilize. Empirical research on choice exemplifies how a variety of elements, not commonly taken into account by liberal theories of autonomy and freedom, shape the way individuals make decisions and choices. Most prominently, the way choices are presented or framed; assumptions the individual makes about risk and potential gain; and marginal channel factors that make some options more accessible than others, have a decisive impact on the decision made. The heuristics of judgment (as

suggested by Kahneman and Tversky and developed since through numerous studies) demonstrate how choice acts rely primarily on intuition and other factors beyond a strict model of rational calculations. (Ben-Porath, 2009, p. 532)

School-choice advocates tend to ignore or downplay the complexities of the act of choice in its social context, including the strong impact of how choices are presented officially and unofficially on the decision individuals make (Ben-Porath, 2009).

Through the review of the research literature on parents and school choice, I asserted that parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and RCT fill specific functions in the decision-making process necessary to engage in school choice. Through parent interviews, I examined the relationships, resources, and experiences that parents draw upon to make decisions about school-choice options. As the researcher, it is my claim that when parents make school-choice decisions, their rational choices are based on how they construct their role as parents which is based on how efficacious they feel as parents.

Factors that influence choice. The research literature has documented well the various factors that influence parents' decisions to engage in school-choice decision making (Bell, 2009a, 2009b; Cooper, 2005, 2007; Wilkins, 2011). The Goldwater Institute (2013) noted that with regard to education parents want more school choices for their children and that navigating these choices can be overwhelming. Parents understand that their children learn in different ways and at different paces: Some love to read whereas others are great at math and technology; some require extra help from their teachers; and some prefer to learn on their own. The idea that the exact same school and classroom setup will work for every child does not concur with the idea that every child is unique.

Some school districts allow parents to handpick the schools that best meet their children's needs—schools they believe will challenge their children and prepare them for the future (Goldwater Institute, 2013). Some school districts have more available choices today than ever before, including private schools and homeschooling options as well as charter schools that offer online classes and Montessori schools that allow children to learn at their own pace (Goldwater Institute, 2013).

In 2012, Walsh used qualitative and quantitative data sets to understand why Hartford Community School (HCS) parents chose the school they did. Walsh interviewed six mothers, each of whom had at least one child enrolled in a HCS. Walsh asked the parents about their experiences going through the choice process: how they selected the school their child currently was attending, how they participated at the school, and how they understood the role of the HCS in the community (Walsh, 2012). The researcher analyzed preexisting data collected by the Parent and Family Involvement in Education – National Household Education Survey (PFI-NHES) conducted in 2007 (Walsh, 2012). The qualitative data from Walsh's study indicate that choice preferences for low-income minority parents vary significantly from those of White middle-class parents. The quantitative data analyzed in this research also suggest that local preferences of low-income minority parents are a factor of income, not race (Walsh, 2012). This study has many limitations. The population sampled was small and consisted of women only. The interview protocol was leading and did not leave room for those being interviewed to openly describe their experiences with the HCS choice process. The researcher interviewed the parents studied regarding their choice of a Hartford Community School and did not consider other choice options.

The researcher used the rational choice theory (RCT) to interpret his findings; however, he found fault in the theory, stating, “Rationalizing the choice process of low-income minority parents through a white middle-class centric understanding of schooling preferences ignores the impact of socioeconomic class and historical perspectives on the choice process” (Walsh, 2012, p. 16). It should be noted, however, that, RCT does not require a researcher to choose a lens through which to rationalize an individual’s choice process.

Wilkins’s (2011) qualitative study further explored how some mothers engage with the meaning and practice of school choice. The research drew upon evidence from in-depth interviews conducted with 11 mothers of different social classes and racial backgrounds living in an area of north London (Wilkins, 2011). To capture some of the emotional strain experienced by parents in their role as choosers, the researcher wrote to parents with children in the last year of primary school; typically it is around this time that parents are summoned to take on the role of consumer in choosing a secondary school for their child (Wilkins, 2011). Wilkins highlighted the discursive role of emotion in these contexts as a form of social action geared toward achieving certain ends. Similar to Walsh (2012), Wilkins’s study sampled only mothers focusing only on the emotions experienced by mothers from London as they navigated the educational marketplace. Wilkins did not make connections to the mothers’ decision-making process that ensued as their experiences with the educational marketplace evolved.

Consistent with the previous studies, Cooper (2007) sampled mothers, though only those identified as low income or working class. Cooper’s (2007) qualitative study of the school-choice standpoint of 14 urban, low-income or working-class African

American mothers used in-depth interview data to examine their school choices and educational advocacy roles. The mothers enrolled their middle school children in four types of schools, including traditional public, charter, private Afrocentric, and private Catholic schools (Cooper, 2007). At the time of this study, all of the mothers resided in the the Los Angeles, CA metropolitan area of the United States. The narratives showed how race, class, and gender influenced their school-choice decision making and their value of education. Cooper suggested that the study's findings called for additional theoretical and empirical work viewing school choice and parental involvement as socially constructed practices that are gendered and culturally relevant.

In a similar qualitative study, Cooper (2005) used in-depth interview data from low-income and working-class African American mothers to describe how they engaged in the educational marketplace and constructed their school choices. The mothers' data shed light on the potential of charter schools and school vouchers to offer parents equal educational opportunity for their children (Cooper, 2005). Cooper used purposeful sampling methods to enlist the 14 mothers who participated in the study. The sampling criteria required the participants to be low-income or working-class African American mothers with children who had previously attended traditional elementary public schools but were currently enrolled in different types of middle schools.

Results from the Cooper (2005) study revealed that the 14 mothers stressed the value of education and linked educational attainment to their children's chances for socioeconomic advancement; thus, the prospect of their children's attaining a quality education carried high stakes. The mothers' motivations and goals directly reflected their roles, particularly the hardships, that they attributed to race, class, and gender factors. A

mother from the Afrocentric academy expressed concern about the treatment of African American boys in the public school system. Another mother recounted numerous negative encounters they and their children had experienced within such schools, particularly those involving public school teachers they characterized as unqualified, uncommitted, uncaring, or biased toward their children (Cooper, 2005).

Cooper (2005) concluded that the educational market's competitive forces did not drive the educational decision making of the mothers in this study as much as their quest for equal educational opportunity, something that both the majority of urban public schools and market-based school-choice options failed to offer them. All but three of the 14 mothers withdrew their children from the traditional public school system by the end of the study (Cooper, 2005). Cooper asserted that their choice to exit the public school system reflected their frustration and unwillingness to have their individual children miss out on educational opportunities while reformers and policymakers debated about how to improve the system. The mothers indicated that improving public schools to meet their children's needs meant providing better school facilities and creating safe and tolerant educational environments (Cooper, 2005). Effective reform also requires that public school educators reject deficit thinking by believing in the potential of all children to achieve high standards and providing children with the instruction and resources they need to excel (Cooper, 2005). These two qualitative studies by Cooper are limited in that they surveyed a small sample size of African American mothers only; however, very similar findings were revealed in both studies.

Cooper (2007) and Wilkins (2011) recognized that it is principally mothers who hold responsibility for linking and coordinating children's and other family members'

needs with services' and agencies' provisions and requirements (Wilkins, 2011). Wilkins identified the dynamic interplay of logic and emotion in the way some middle-class parents formulate their school choices and focused on the emotional laboring that often underpins mothers' rationalizations of choice. Cooper (2007) asserted that the mothers' school-choice decision making constitutes an important act of cultural resistance and empowerment she called *motherwork*. Cooper (2005) identified the mothers as educational advocates for their children. She described a sense of empowerment in them and noted that they are able to explain what they want for their children. These studies are limited by their consistently small sample size and population of women only. Furthermore, feminist methodological principles guided Cooper's (2005) research approach. Nevertheless, these studies can be used to prove that mothers are capable of making school-choice decisions based on what they want for their children

Bell (2009a) completed a longitudinal comparative case study of 48 parents' thinking prior to their children's attending sixth or ninth grade. Bell followed parents from January to November 2003, interviewing them multiple times over the 9 months before, during, and after their selection of a new school. The sample included parents whose children had a wide range of schooling experiences. Parents in the sample had previously sent their children to both failing and nonfailing schools across six types of schools: neighborhood public, magnet public, charter, secular private, nonsecular private, and homeschool. Bell used three interviews, which spanned the 9 months preceding and immediately following the selection of a new school and which were designed to capture and track parents' choice processes and choice sets. Bell found that parents of varying social class backgrounds had different choice sets that were not explained by the

processes or reasoning they used to construct their choice sets. Instead, the resources parents used to construct their choice sets constrained the schools they were willing to consider along existing boundaries of social inequality. Bell asserted that although it remains important to scrutinize the number of high-quality schools available to parents, these findings suggest one must also scrutinize the constraining influence of the choice set so that all parents consider the options available.

Bell (2009b) also investigated how and when geography factored into parents' thinking. Using a longitudinal, prospective, comparative case study the researcher studied 48 families living in Detroit and the inner ring of suburbs surrounding Detroit. Bell's goal was to understand the range of ways parents think about choice over time. The researcher investigated parents' geographic preferences using two research questions: How do parents' geographic preferences shape their choices? and When do geographic preferences matter in the choice process? (Bell, 2009b). For this geographic analysis, Bell focused on a subset of the 48 families: 36 families who lived within Detroit's city limits. These parents were selecting sixth or ninth grade for their children. Bell interviewed parents three times between January and November of 2003, collecting and analyzing data collected from each interview. The interviews captured parents' thinking before, during, and after their selection of a new school. Bell used a purposeful sampling strategy to focus on school type (neighborhood public, magnet public, charter, secular private, nonsecular private, or homeschool). The researcher found that the parents in her study preferred convenient schools as well as schools that were places they could trust and in which they could envision their children growing. Space- and place-

based preferences shaped and bound the set of schools parents were willing to consider (Bell, 2009b).

Bell's (2009b) sample did not include parents who had not currently entered the school-choice process. The studied parents are very important to the educational marketplace because their experiences with acquiring information about choice options from "the outside" are valuable to the existing body of research on school choice. The methodological limitations are in both of Bell's (2009a, 2009b) studies. Although the two investigations focused on different inquiries, they sampled the same population. Both investigations focused on the presented factors that influence parents' decisions .

A 2007 study by de Brabander and Rozendaal explored the relationships among epistemological beliefs, social status of parents, and school preferences. They measured epistemological beliefs by 20 bipolar statements; they derived school preferences from paired comparisons of educational quality of available primary schools; and they measured social status in two dimensions, status level and status type, derived from parents' responses regarding life style (de Brabander & Rozendaal, 2007). De Brabander and Rozendaal conducted their study in a small urban town in the western part of the Netherlands; they used a questionnaire to inventory preferences for the six available primary schools among all parents who needed to choose a school for their child within the period of a year. The researchers received responses from 262 of 430 questionnaire recipients (60.9%), including 216 women and 46 men, reflecting the fact that children's education is still largely a woman's job (de Brabander & Rozendaal, 2007). Parents separated the schools into three groups: modern, old fashioned, or in between.

De Brabander and Rozendaal (2007) found that the difference between old fashioned and modern was associated with several characteristics, such as predominantly whole-class instruction versus independent (group) work, emphasis on basic skills versus attention for cultural activities, unigrade versus multigrade grouping, a simple advancement system versus an elaborate guidance system, and absence versus presence of a special services coordinator. The researchers noted that, to a large extent, the denomination of the school determined educational quality in the minds of the parents. Parents tried to find a school that fit their epistemological beliefs, which appeared to be influenced more strongly by education than income (de Brabander & Rozendaal, 2007). Parents at higher status levels tended to prefer schools different from those preferred by parents at lower status levels (de Brabander & Rozendaal, 2007).

The results of de Brabander and Rozendaal's (2007) study suggest that parents' educational background influences their school-choice decisions more than income does. Their study involved a very large sample; although not representative of the United States, the study's large sample size allowed for variation in ideas and beliefs regarding school choice.

In a 2006 qualitative study, Finn, Caldwell, and Raub used open-ended structured interviews to investigate the perceptions of seven parents of students with disabilities regarding charter schools as well as the reasons they chose charter schools to educate their children. Each of the study participants had one child who was receiving special education services at the charter school. The charter school, located in a rural area served by five public schools and four parochial schools, had a college preparation focus (Finn et al., 2006). The children of the seven parents ranged in age from 7 to 14, and the

majority were boys; three students were reported to have speech impairments, one student was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, one student with a behavior disorder, two students with learning disabilities, and one student with both a learning disability and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Finn et al., 2006). The same interviewer asked all the interviewees the same questions in the same order to eliminate as much bias as possible.

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed the reasons the participating parents transferred their children to a charter school, what they perceived as the strengths and limitations of the charter school's special education services, and comparisons of the services of the previously attended school and the charter school (Finn et al., 2006). The following themes emerged from the interview data: relatively small school size allowing students to receive more individualized attention; perceived academic excellence (parents believed the charter school had better academics and higher standards than the traditional public schools); willingness to provide services and addressing disability areas (parents were pleased with the charter school's immediacy in responding to their children's needs); responsiveness of the staff (staff exerted extra effort in building relationships); clear communication between school and home (school communication was more prevalent and ongoing at the charter school); faculty turnover (interviewees were concerned that children were not getting the best education possible); and change of focus in the school (as administration changed, the school focus became more traditional, a focus parents had intended to leave behind) (Finn et al., 2006).

Finn et al. (2006) found there was a general consensus among the parents that the traditional area public school did not meet their children's needs in terms of size,

academics, and addressing each student's unique educational needs. Parents noted the charter school's willingness to address student disabilities and its strong communication with families. The researchers noted that parents also reported having concerns about staff turnover and academic changes in short periods of time. When comparing the special education services provided by the charter school to the child's previous public school, the participants noted differences in staff flexibility, teacher assessability and attentiveness, and school size favoring the charter school program (Finn et al., 2006). This study involved a very small sample size for interview; with only one charter school to study, the researchers' data lose validity with the lack of diversity of school choices (Finn et al., 2006). The results of this qualitative study, although limited by the sample size and generalizability, reveal the importance of school officials' understanding what parents want in a school for their children.

Goldring and Rowley (2006) completed a quantitative study to determine why parents choose a nontraditional school, how they make school choices, and what the dynamics of the choice process are, with an emphasis on applicants to public schools of choice, specifically parents who apply to magnet schools and consider private schools. The researchers drew the sample from parent applicants from one school district who submitted magnet school applications for at least one of their children for the 2002-2003 school year (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). They administered a survey on school choice and parental involvement via telephone interview using the computer-assisted telephone interview method (CATI); only parents who knew the most about their children's schooling were interviewed (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). The researchers interviewed respondents toward the end of the 2002-2003 school year, prompting them to answer

questions only for their oldest child in preschool, kindergarten, fifth grade, seventh grade, or ninth grade (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). The researchers reported a total sample for magnet school applicants of 748; the response rate for the sample of magnet school applicants was 56.7%.

Goldring and Rowley (2006) found that parents who considered private schools among their school-choice options were likely to earn higher family incomes and have more education. Without holding income and education constant, parents of Black children were no less likely to consider sending their children to private schools than parents of White children. In this sample of active choosers, Black parents did not seem to experience more constraints on choice—either economic or social—than White parents (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). The researchers reported that parents who considered sending their children to private schools were slightly more likely to be satisfied with their children’s previous schools than parents who did not consider private schools. Parents who considered private schools were more likely to give assistance to their children at home, participate in their children’s schools, communicate with their children about school, and believe that their participation in the children’s education was meaningful and helpful to their academic success (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). Parents’ educational priorities were slightly different for those who considered private schools and those who did not. Parents who considered sending their children to private schools also tended to have slightly more interpersonal social networks than parents who did not consider sending their children to private school (Goldring & Rowley, 2006). This quantitative study has limitations with regard to the sample population. The sample was drawn from magnet school applicants only and did not include parents who had

considered public schools but were at that time sending their children to private school. The study did not identify differences between parents who participated in magnet school choice versus public choice. This study did not include the contingency of parents who chose to educate their children at home using home school programs.

One school-choice option that parents are gravitating to is parent-led home-based education, which most call homeschooling. “Homeschooling is a form of private education that is parent led and home based,” and “homeschooling does not rely on either state-run public schooling or institutional private schooling for a child’s education” (Ray, 2013, p. 324). Most parents and youth decide to homeschool for more than one reason, and their reasons often change over time (Resetar, 1990). The following are the most common reasons that parents or youth give for homeschooling: (a) to customize or individualize the child’s education, (b) to accomplish more academically, (c) to use pedagogical approaches other than those typical in institutional schools, (d) to enhance family relationships, (e) to provide guided and reasoned social interactions with peers and adults, (f) to provide a safer learning environment, (g) to avoid negative experiences parents had in institutional schools, and (h) to fulfill the parents’ job to teach and impart a particular set of values, beliefs, and worldview to their children and not delegate such to schools (Murphy, 2012; Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2013; Stevens, 2001). Several academics (e.g., Murphy, 2012; Ray, 2013) have cautioned, however, about the methodological limitations of many studies on homeschooling so that readers do not conclude that homeschooling necessarily causes high (or low) academic achievement. Most of the studies involve serious sampling challenges and have been descriptive and cross-sectional, and not causal-comparative, in design (Johnson, 2001; Murphy, 2012).

Researchers have had considerable difficulty in getting guaranteed representative samples.

Ray (2015) completed a cross-sectional, explanatory nonexperimental study or causal-comparative study. Data were collected from homeschool parents and students at only a single point in time. The dependent variable of concern was academic achievement as measured by a nationally normed standardized academic achievement test (i.e., ITBS). The independent variables were types of education/schooling (i.e., public schooling, homeschooling), gender of student, and socioeconomic status. The homeschool target population was primarily middle-class Black homeschool families with students in grade levels 4 to 8 (roughly ages 9 to 14) who had been home educated at least half of their K-12 grade-level school years. Ray accessed families mainly through a nationwide support organization serving predominantly African American homeschoolers. NBH promoted the study to approximately 140 of their members and families, and to a larger list that included anyone who wanted to be on it. Any child in a member household or who was on the list that the parents might consider Black and met the other requirements of the study qualified for the Ray study. Ray also promoted the study to all Black homeschool support groups that could be identified as such and sent out an announcement about the study to statewide homeschool support organizations listed by The Teaching Home (2014) and the Homeschool Protection Group. The researcher also promoted the study to African American families via word of mouth, contacting various support organizations who assisted in contacting Black homeschool families who might be willing to participate in the study. These organizations encouraged all Black families to participate, regardless of their reasons for

homeschooling, socioeconomic status, or prediction of how their children might score on a standardized academic achievement test.

The Black homeschool students in Ray's (2015) study lived in 15 states and the District of Columbia. The 81 students were from all four regions of the United States, as follows: Northeast (8), Midwest (14), South (52), and West (7); 39.5% of the students sampled were male. Their mean age was 11.62 and the mean grade level was 5.96. The mean number of children in the home, ages 21 and under, was 4.15. There were 5 or more children in 39.5% of the families. The mother was the main home-education teacher for 79 of the students. Some 11.1% of the mothers had been certified to teach in any state. Of the fathers, 12.7% had ever been certified to teach in any state.

Ray (2015) administered to homeschool parents a 39-item, paper-and-pencil survey that was comprised of items on topics such as parent and family demographics, students' demographics and schooling history, approach to homeschooling, and parents' motivations or reasons for homeschooling their children. Ray reported the six reasons most commonly selected for homeschooling by the Black parents sampled were (a) the parents "prefer to teach the child at home so that you [parent] can provide religious or moral instruction" (chosen by 96.3% of parents); (b) "for the parents to transmit values, beliefs, and worldview to the child" (95.1%); (c) "develop stronger family relationships between children and parents and among brothers and sisters" (87.7%); (d) "to customize or individualize the education of each child" (80.2%); (e) "accomplish more academically than in conventional schools" (76.5%); and (f) "want to provide religious or moral instruction different from that taught in public schools" (76.5%). This research study described homeschooling experiences only through the lens of the African American

community. The researcher had access to a large population sample by accessing a variety of homeschool networks; however, Ray did not include parents who accessed homeschooling options through the public school system in the population sample.

Much earlier Houston and Toma (2003) conducted a study regarding homeschool as a choice option; the study empirically examined the decision to educate children at home. The researchers used two sets of data that were constructed with input from state departments of education and matched to data from the National Center of Education Statistics. The first set was a panel of enrollment and school-finance data for the 176 school districts in the State of Kentucky over the 5 academic years from 1991-1996. The second set consisted of 1395 school districts. The researchers matched the school enrollment data in Kentucky and across the states to demographic data from the National Center of Education Statistics, financial data obtained from state departments of education, and data from *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*, a report prepared by the Roper Center for Public Opinion (Houston & Toma, 2003). Houston and Toma reported that the results of this quantitative study suggest that the attributes of households and the public school district influence the decision to educate children at home. Further, income differences within a district significantly influence the home school decision. This body of research on the American education system did not address homeschooling as a school-choice option; however, it is important to note that increasing numbers of parents are considering homeschooling as a choice option to educate their children (USDOE, 2007).

A 2002 study by researchers Schneider and Buckley used Internet-based methodological tools to study parental preferences revealed through information search

patterns; the researchers compared these findings to the standard ones in the literature, which had been based largely on telephone interviews. The researchers chose to monitor an Internet resource that provided information about all the public schools (charter and traditional) to parents in Washington, DC (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). The site provided information on school location, test scores, student demographics, mission statements, and academic programs (Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

The researchers gathered information about visitors to the site; they required everyone wishing access to the site to respond to a short set of questions to generate a user profile including visitor status (parent, student, other), education level, frequency of Internet use, and indication of whether the person was signing on from home, work, or school. Between November 1999 and June 2000, more than 2,300 different individuals visited the site: 60% were parents, 10% were students, and the remaining visitors were in the *other* category, which included school district officials, curious city residents, and education researchers (Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

For the purposes of this analysis, the researchers focused on parent search behavior as an indicator of preferences. They reported the percentage distribution of school attributes viewed by all parents within the first five “steps/moves” they made during their visits to the Internet resource. The researchers identified a strong bias toward accessing the demographic characteristics of the student population; this finding was in contrast to earlier verbal reports about the importance of race (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). In a 1998 study of expressed preferences by Schneider et al., less than 5% of the parents who were surveyed said that the race and economic background of the students in a school were among the most important characteristics of schools (Schneider

& Buckley, 2002). Aside from the demographic information, parents were most likely to view a map showing the location of the school (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). The researchers suggested that in a highly stratified and segregated city such as Washington, DC, school location also conveys a considerable amount of information about the student body. Although many parents said they were concerned about high-quality teachers, very few parents, in their search behavior, actually visited the part of the school profiles that provided that information; however, parents did access test score data and academic program data in fairly high numbers, though not in comparison with verbal reports of preferences (Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

Schneider and Buckley (2002) also compared Internet data from Washington DC with survey data from the New York metropolitan area. The methodological limitations can be found in the accuracy with which parents correctly selected their preferences and the persistence they exercised to navigate through the Internet resources available to them. Although limited methodologically, this study is significant in that it identified parents' interests in location, not in terms of geographical references to their home, but as a predictor of the student body profile.

Similar to Schneider and Buckley (2002), Kleitz et al. (2000) studied a large sample and analyzed new data generated through 1,100 interviews of choosing parents. Respondents to the survey that generated the data had made a choice to send their children to an alternative to the conventional public schools (Kleitz et al., 2000). The researchers asked parents five questions that targeted specific factors such as educational quality, class size, safety, location, and children's friends. Although the researchers found differences among racial, ethnic, and income groups in terms of preferences

regarding their children's schools, the differences did not extend to the parents' common concern for academic excellence. The data analyzed in this research study did not address the racial composition of the schools parents chose. This information would be helpful to determine if there were evidence of racial aversions in school choices made by different racial groups. A qualitative study with in-depth interviews would have afforded the opportunity for this type of information to emerge as a theme.

In 1998, Schneider et al. used survey data from two suburban and two inner-city school districts to investigate parents' preferences for different aspects of education. The researchers contracted with the Polimetrics Laboratory for Political and Social Research to interview 400 residents in each of four school districts in the New York metropolitan area. The sample population was limited to parents or decision makers with children in Grades K-8. They conducted the survey in the spring of 1995 and included parents of children in both private and public schools. The researchers examined how parents differed in their evaluation of four fundamental dimensions of schools: academic quality of the school, racial composition of its student body, school's values, and school's disciplinary code. They examined the degree to which parental evaluations of each of these dimensions was a function of race and class, holding constant the parents' geographic location (city or suburb) and whether the parent chose a public or private school for his or her child. Results showed that parents of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds did find different school attributes important, but these differences were not those emphasized by most literature of the time (Schneider et al., 1998). Parents of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and parents who identified themselves as racial minorities were more likely to value schools that provided a safe environment in which

the fundamentals of education were delivered (Schneider et al., 1998). The researchers suggested that an emphasis on values and diversity might be luxuries that middle-class and White parents were more in a position to emphasize than were less educated parents or parents who were racial minorities.

This study was limited by the number of choice options considered by parents. Unlike some of the other studies critiqued, this mixed-methods study did not offer school geographic location or parents' cultural values and beliefs as a dimension of schools. The study sampled only parents with students in Grades K-8. Some districts offer choice options only at the middle and high school levels. Despite the limitations, this study was consistent with the 2007 research of de Brabander and Rozendaal, describing parents' SES and race as factors in what they valued most when choosing a school.

Van Dunk, Messiner, and Browne (1998) explored the factors that parents seek in a school from the perspectives of those individuals immediately affected by private school-choice programs. The researchers relied on data obtained through interviews with 270 parents and educators and a public opinion survey conducted in September 1997 with taxpayers in Ohio and Wisconsin. The data for their research were part of a larger project investigating choice school accountability (Van Dunk et al., 1998). The researchers first chose a sample of five public schools and five private schools from each city, in which the majority of the parents interviewed were affiliated with one of the 10 schools (Van Dunk et al., 1998). They asked parents the following question: "Assuming you could have all the information you wanted about a school, what would you want to know about schools in order to make a decision about where to send your own child?" The researcher followed this question with a series of probing questions for specific responses toward a

number of factors they hypothesized parents might look for in a school (Van Dunk et al., 1998).

In response to their first question, the researchers found that parents overwhelmingly wanted to know what was being taught at the school as well as the method of teaching. Although one of the older studies regarding parents and school choice, consistent with more recent studies, this qualitative study asserted that parents know what they want for their children's education. To make decisions regarding their children's education, parents will rely on their personal values and subjective desired goals of education, as well as others within their social and professional networks, to collect information.

Parents whose networks do not provide access to relevant and valuable information regarding options of school choice are limited in their capacity to make informed choices (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999); lack of access presents barriers to navigating the school-choice process. Social creaming begins when parents with wider social networks and more access to information are more likely to participate in the choice process (Goldring & Rowley, 2006).

Barriers to school choice. For parents to make choices among school options, they first need to know what is available to them. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, various states and school districts have followed the lead of the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and produced parent guides to school choice (USDOE, 2007). The guides include very detailed information on how school districts should reach and inform parents. Some guides include steps for selecting a school that is right for the child, enrollment options, and scholarships that are offered (USDOE, 2007). Although the

information is plentiful, there is no accountability system in place to ensure all parents receive the same information in the time needed to make informed decisions (USDOE, 2007).

DeArmond et al. (2014) completed a quantitative study with 4,000 public school parents from eight cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Using a combination of landline and cell phone numbers, the researcher randomly selected 500 public school parents in each city participate in a survey (DeArmond et al., 2014). The survey questionnaire covered a range of topics, including whether parents were assigned or chose a school, how satisfied they were with their school, what they thought of their options, and what got in the way of finding a good choice for their child (DeArmond et al., 2014). DeArmond et al. found that parents most often cited the following barriers to choosing: understanding which schools their child was eligible to attend (33%), getting transportation to and from school (26%), and getting information about schools (25%). The researchers noted that compared to their college-educated peers, parents with less than a high school diploma were significantly more likely to cite all of the barriers to choosing a school for their children, including challenges with the enrollment process, confusing paperwork, different applications, and different application deadlines.

These findings suggest that many parents are choosing a school for their child, but many also have limited options and struggle to find the information and transportation they need to choose with confidence (DeArmond et al., 2014). This quantitative study did not completely describe a parent's experience with navigating the school-choice process or the decisions involved in the process of choosing a school for their child. The

researchers did not describe any commonalities in the participants of the cities that were chosen to be part of this research study. Demographic information about the participants is helpful in framing the context in which a study has taken place.

Howell (2006) provided an early assessment of parental knowledge of and interests in new educational opportunities as well as the challenges faced by advocates of choice and accountability who aim to boost parental control over and involvement in children's education. The researcher administered the telephone survey via random-digital dialing during the summer of 2003 to 1,000 public school parents in the 10 largest school districts in Massachusetts. The surveys, conducted in English or Spanish, required 15-20 minutes to complete. To participate, households needed to have at least one child in a public school; the researcher directed questions to parents or guardians only. The breakdown of respondents was as follows: 72% mothers, 22% fathers, 3% grandparents, and 3% other relatives (Howell, 2006). Due to the findings, the researcher questioned why so few parents transferred schools under NCLB. Howell reported that the general awareness of NCLB did not appear to be a problem. Large margins of parents generally, as well as parents with children in underperforming schools specifically, claimed to have heard of the act and its choice provisions (Howell, 2006).

The researcher found that knowledge about how the law works and who qualifies for new educational opportunities might represent a contributing factor. Only one of every four parents with children in underperforming Massachusetts public schools successfully identified the school's status and hence grasped the most basic information required to take advantage of NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions (Howell, 2006). Although the results of this study illuminated parents' knowledge of

provisions under NCLB, the results did not discuss parents' knowledge of choice provisions specific to their district. This quantitative study failed to describe the demographics of parents who had knowledge and took advantage of the districts' choice provisions. The validity of the data is questionable because there is no way to verify the parameters set forth by the researchers to determine if the respondents were parents or guardians of school-aged children.

Cost and information influence the school-choice decision. Information about school alternatives is of concern to many critics of consumer choice in education (Glazerman, 1998). According to Glazerman, the Carnegie Foundation noted that parents differ in how well informed they are about school differences. Glazerman argued that low-income or non-English speaking families are at a disadvantage, citing Bridge and Blackman's (1978) documentation of lower levels of awareness of the current policy and school alternatives among low-SES households. Glazerman insisted that information is costly to obtain. In the case of school choice, obtaining information can mean spending time visiting schools, reading official publications and newspapers, talking to friends and neighbors, and researching school achievement data and profiles (Glazerman, 1998). Because these activities can be costly, Glazerman asserted that households gather information up to the point where the marginal costs of doing so outweigh the marginal benefit, a point that varies for different families. This research asserted that access to information affects school-choice decision making. Those who can acquire the information are in a better position to make school-choice decisions. This study supports findings by Bell (2009) in that it found that parents do prefer schools that are closer to their homes.

Misconceptions of school choice. Rabovsky (2011) used a mixed-methods approach to examine how performance relative to other schools within the district influenced the decision to exercise transfer options. Rabovsky sought to present evidence that exercising choice is a two-stage process involving one set of criteria that shape the decision to exit a particular school and a different set of criteria that parents or students use when evaluating alternative schools. The researcher used a qualitative approach to interview school administrators to understand their reaction to school choice. The interviews revealed that administrators were nonchalant about transfers because the district's transfer policy did not allow principals to accept or deny individual applicants (Rabovsky, 2011). When asked why students transferred, administrators believed many students sought to enter one of the district's two merit-based magnet programs, based on the academic advantages offered at those schools, with which the neighborhood nonmagnet schools could not compete; in addition, a large group of students transferred for reasons tied to disciplinary issues or personal conflicts with staff or other students (Rabovsky, 2011). Rabovsky used a quantitative approach to analyze school performance and transfer data to better understand the factors that drive parent or student decisions to exercise choice options. The researcher used the Academic Performance Index (API) test scores because they were widely used within the community, both by parents and school administrators, to assess school quality. Through the quantitative analysis, Rabovsky found that academic performance mattered in transfer decisions and, more importantly, had a positive effect on net transfers, even within the open-transfer process among neighborhood schools. Rabovsky's quantitative study is the only study

that cited school academic performance as a motivator for parents to enter the educational marketplace.

Bifulco, Cobb, and Bell (2009) found that attendance at an interdistrict magnet high school had positive effects on the math and reading achievement of central city students and that interdistrict magnet middle schools had positive effects on reading achievement. The interdistrict magnet schools, on average, succeeded in providing their students more integrated, higher achieving peer environments, and they also, on average, had positive effects on achievement (Bifulco et al., 2009). Parents have misconceptions about school choice and student achievement, state assessments, school expectations, etc. Whatever salutary benefits magnet schools may have, according to Archbald and Kaplan (2004), there is no reason to expect that magnet or choice districts are systemically very different from districts without magnet schools and with student assignment policies linked more to zoned attendance areas

Betebenner, Howe, and Foster (2005) also identified a misconception regarding school choice and state assessments. Betebenner et al. (2005) studied a large western school district with an approximate enrollment of 27,500 students. Based upon previous school-choice research in the district, Betebenner et al. identified two groups of parents participating in choice in the district: parents whose children were exercising choice between school levels and parents whose children were exercising choice within a school level. These two groups of parents indicated fundamentally different motivations for participating in the district choice program (Betebenner et al., 2005). The researchers used data from three sources to explore the ways in which school choice and test-based accountability drew on each other: state assessment data of children in the district,

school-choice data for every participating student in the district choice program, and a parental survey of both participants and nonparticipants of choice (Betebenner et al., 2005). The merged assessment and choice data were used to examine questions regarding students' achievement as well as patterns of choice-based enrollment. Betebenner et al. used survey data to assess parent attitudes toward school report cards in the district.

The researchers found there was no uniform benefit on student test scores for those students participating in choice; they suggested that schools with a high degree of choice appeared to do well because the pool of students from which they drew was highly able, leading some to wrongly believe that the school was responsible for those children's scores (Betebenner et al., 2005). This study's findings are limited because it is the only study that made a connection between test-based accountability and motivations for entering the educational marketplace.

Chapter Summary

This critical review of the research literature revealed multiple factors that influence parents' decisions to enter the educational marketplace. Logic and emotion play a major role for some parents when formulating school choices (Wilkins, 2011). Studies of parents who are economically disadvantaged and of a variety of social class backgrounds have identified different factors that influence the parents' school-choice decisions (Bell, 2009a, 2009b). Other research revealed that parents prefer convenient schools as well as schools they can trust and in which they can envision their children growing (Bell, 2009a, 2009b). Parents try to find a school that fits their epistemological beliefs, that appears to be influenced more strongly by education than by income (de

Brabander & Rozendaal, 2007). Studies of parents who had enrolled their children in schools of choice revealed how race, class, and gender factors influenced their school-choice making and their value of education (Cooper, 2007). Some parents believe that traditional public schools do not meet their child's needs in terms of size, academics, and addressing the student's unique educational needs (Finn, 2006). Researchers have suggested that attributes of the household and the public school district influence the decision to educate at home (Houston & Toma, 2003). A study of parents' school search profiles suggested that parents' interest in school location is not related to geographical proximity to their home but to the location's being a predictor of the student body profile (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Parents of lower SES and parents who identify themselves as racial minorities are more likely to value schools that provide a safe environment in which the fundamentals of education are delivered (Schneider et al., 1998). Some parents want information about what is being taught at the school as well as the method of teaching (Van Dunk et al., 1998).

Barriers that impede a parent's decision to engage in the school-choice process are well documented in the research literature. A quarter of parents with children in underperforming public schools were able to successfully identify the school's status and grasp the most basic information required to take advantage of NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions (Howell, 2006). Researchers agreed that parents differ in how well informed they are about school differences (Glazerman, 1998).

Misconceptions exist about parents who enter the educational marketplace and schools of choice. Research has revealed that school officials believe that parents enter the educational marketplace based on the academic advantages offered at schools other

than those within their boundaries (Rabovsky, 2011). Some school officials believe that students transfer due to disciplinary issues or personal conflicts with staff or other students (Rabovsky, 2011). Researchers suggested that schools with a high degree of choice appear to do well because the pool of students from which they draw is highly able, leading some to wrongly believe the school is responsible for the children's scores (Betebenner et al., 2005).

It is not enough to simply expand school choice as a model for education reform (Elacqua et al., 2006) without fully understanding how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. Parents' demand for schools that suit their needs influences what school systems supply (Cooper, 2005). Many proposals for reform now seek to rewrite the relationship between stakeholders, building on a widely shared vision emphasizing small, autonomous schools, unburdened by a large administrative structure, and fueled by a desire to bring parents, students, teachers, and administrators into cooperative, supportive relationships (Buckley, 2007). Parents are essential to school governance and the creation of effective schools (Buckley, 2007). Parents must have the power to choose schools for their children based on the factors they consider to be important. Until more is known specifically about how parents make school-choice decisions for their children, a gap remains in the research literature.

This review of the literature has highlighted studies revealing the factors that influence parents' decisions to enter the educational marketplace, the barriers that impede parents' success in making school-choice decisions, and misconceptions about schools of choice and why parents engage in the school-choice process. The missing link, however, is the lack of knowledge of how parents engage in the decision-making process. Thus,

the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children. The next chapter describes the research methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how parents make school choices. Particularly, I sought to examine how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children. I also explored what factors parents consider when choosing a school for their children, how parents gather information about the schools available to their children, and how parents choose the school that best fits their preferences. To develop a deeper understanding of parents’ experiences and decision making regarding school choice, I conducted a basic interpretive qualitative study as outlined by Merriam (2009) to collect and analyze data. Participant interviews of parents regarding their experiences with school choice were the primary source of data collection during this qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research allowed me to use the experiences of the participants to explain a particular phenomenon. Merriam wrote,

Qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. (Merriam, 2009, p. 23)

Understanding human action and the meaning behind the action is successfully achieved by using qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln noted that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Merriam stated in part that qualitative researchers in education “simply seek to discover and understand a

phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 2002, p. 11). According to Creswell, qualitative research starts with unstructured data, then through data analysis interprets meaning in verbal form to achieve a rich understanding of people or a phenomenon (as cited in Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

I chose a basic interpretive qualitative method for this study because I sought to gather the personal accounts of parents as they made decisions with regard to school choices for their children. Qualitative research is concerned with exploring people’s life history and everyday behavior (Silverman, 2000). According to Maxwell (2005), the strengths of qualitative research are as follows: It allows the researcher to identify processes rather than outcomes, and it focuses on situations and people, with an emphasis on words rather than numbers.

Creswell described eight reasons for undertaking a qualitative study:

1. Select a qualitative study because of the nature of the research question. In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with how or what so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on.
2. Choose a qualitative study because the topic needs to be explored.
3. Use a qualitative study because of the need to present a detailed view of the topic
4. Choose a qualitative approach to study individuals in their natural setting.
5. Select a qualitative approach because of interest in writing in a literary style in which the writer brings himself or herself into the study.

6. Employ a qualitative study because of sufficient time and resources to spend on extensive data collection in the field and detailed data analysis of “text” information.
7. Select qualitative research because your audience may be receptive to qualitative research.
8. Employ a qualitative approach to emphasize the researcher’s role as an active learner who can tell the story from a participant’s view rather than an expert who passes judgment on participants. (Creswell, 1997, p. 17)

This chapter addresses (a) the research questions; (b) the theoretical framework; (c) the research design; (d) the site, population, and sample; (e) the data management technique; (f) the protocols; (g) and the risks, benefits, and ethical considerations of this study.

Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study was the following: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? There were three questions related to the main research question:

1. What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children?
2. How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children?
3. How do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences?

Epistemology and Control for Bias

According to Creswell (1998), five philosophical assumptions or paradigms exist from which qualitative researchers approach their studies. The ontological assumption

relates to the nature of reality, the epistemological assumption rests upon the relationship of the researcher to that being studied, the axiological assumption refers to the role of values within a study, the rhetorical assumption deals with the language of research, and the methodological assumption relates to the research process (Creswell, 1998, p. 74). Further ideological perspectives or “knowledge claims,” as discussed by Creswell, enter into research design (Creswell, 2003, p. 6).

In the design for the current research study, the research paradigm that guided the inquiry was constructivism. According to Crotty, “constructivism describes the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them” (Crotty, 2003, p. 79). “To uphold the integrity of qualitative inquiry and control for bias prior to entering the natural setting, the researcher is duty bound to share any background, experiences, and personal relationship to the topic being researched that may possibly impact the study” (Creswell, 1998, p. 74).

For most of my career as an educator, I have often inquired about the mass exodus of parents and students from the public school system causing schools to become under enrolled and later close. Years later, however, the same parents would return to the public school system, but without evidence or data to explain why. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with families whose children attend a variety of school-choice options. These families have been very diverse socioeconomically, educationally, and racially and yet appeared to be searching for the same thing with regard to educating their children.

Initially, I had reservations about interjecting my own motivations, feelings, positions, and beliefs about why/how parents make school-choice decisions into my

research efforts. Concomitantly, I believe that this “experiential knowledge” (a term coined by Maxwell [2005, p. 37]) was the impetus to carry me through the work as I reached out to hear the voices and stories of parents involved in the school choice process.

My caution to myself was not to allow my experiential knowledge to interfere with the analysis of outcomes. Maxwell (2005) recommended extensive note taking and memo writing by the researcher throughout the research to facilitate the analytic process. I took notes during each interview session to document body language, facial gestures, tone, and other notable features.

Stemming from my personal reflections on the school-choice process, the question kept arising: How do parents make school-choice decisions for their children? The gap in the literature concerning parents who are making the decision to engage in the educational marketplace and how parents reflect upon and consider school-choice options that help them attain the desired educational experiences for their children strongly demonstrated the need for this study.

The theoretical foundation for this study emerged from the literature on school choice and parents’ decision making. The perspective of rational choice theory, parental role construction, and parental self-efficacy informed this study. These theories served as a lens through which to explore and understand the experiences parents described in making school-choice decisions for their children.

Research Design

I selected the basic interpretive qualitative method of research for this study to provide an opportunity to interview parents in their neighborhoods and at their children's schools to obtain their points of view. Creswell wrote,

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p. 15)

In this basic interpretive qualitative research study, I strove to determine how the experiences and decision making of the parents affected their experiences in school choice.

I used an interpretive approach to examine how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. The primary source of data collection was semistructured interviews with parents. Merriam wrote the following about interviews:

Either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (Merriam, 2009, p. 90)

I analyzed the data inductively to identify recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data (Merriam, 2002). I present and discuss a rich, descriptive account of the findings using references to the literature that initially framed the study (Merriam, 2002).

Merriam (1998) noted that in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument used to collect data in an effort to understand the meaning people have constructed to make sense of their experiences in the world. Researcher Patton contended,

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily but to understand the nature of that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting—and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting.... The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (Patton, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 6)

Merriam (2009) identified important characteristics that the researcher must understand about the participant's perspective when conducting a qualitative study. Merriam noted the first concern as an understanding of the participant's perceptions from the *emic* or insider's perspective as opposed to the *etic* or outsider's perspective or view. Second, as the primary instrument for data collection, the researcher must be responsive to the context, adapt techniques to circumstances, process data immediately by responding to the nonverbal aspect of the context, and clarify and summarize data as they unfold and as the study evolves. A third characteristic significant to qualitative research is the involvement of fieldwork. The researcher must be available to go physically to the participants at the site, setting, or institution to observe the behavior occurring in its natural setting. Merriam maintained that qualitative research involves employing inductive reasoning strategies that build abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than test existing theory. Finally, the product of a qualitative study involves the use of richly descriptive words rather than pictures to explain what has been learned about a phenomenon, focusing on process, meaning, and understanding.

Site, Population, and Sample Selection

Merriam wrote, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned (Merriam, 2002). To begin purposeful sampling, one first determines what criteria are essential in choosing who is to be interviewed or what sites are to be observed (Merriam, 2002). I used criterion purposeful sampling to determine participants who met the criteria for this study. Maxwell recommended purposeful sampling when “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). I held informal conversations to explore topics of school choice and experiences with decision making regarding school choice. I purposefully selected parents to participate in this study from a socioeconomically and racially diverse United Methodist congregation and an attached preschool/kindergarten. I selected the sample to understand how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make decisions regarding school choice for their children.

Qualitative samples must be large enough to assure that most or all of the perceptions that might be important are uncovered; on the other hand, if the sample is too large, data become repetitive and, eventually, superfluous (Mason, 2010). Merriam conceded that the sample size

depends on the questions being asked, the data being gathered, the analysis in progress, and the resources you have to support the study.... What is needed is an

adequate number of participants, sites, or activities to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the study. (Merriam, 2009, p. 80)

Lincoln and Guba stated, “If the purpose is to maximize the information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus *redundancy* is the primary criterion” (Lincoln & Guba, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 80). I conducted 20 interviews with parents who currently had students at schools of choice or those who were entering the educational marketplace for the first time.

For the purpose of this study, I sampled a socioeconomically and racially diverse United Methodist congregation and an attached preschool/kindergarten in an urban–suburban school district, located in a Mid-Atlantic state. I collected demographic data for participants, including age, gender, race, education level, employment status, marital status, number of children, and grade band of each child.

Research Procedures

I conducted this study in four phases: bracketing, negotiating entry, data collection, and data analysis.

Phase one – Bracketing. I bracketed the personal experiences that led to my interest in this particular research study. Creswell (1998) noted that in a phenomenological study, the researcher must use the bracketing process to set aside all prejudgments. The researcher must bracket all personal experiences and rely completely on the data presented through interviews, observations, and document analysis to reach the essence of the phenomena. According to Morse and Richards (2002), the researcher should consistently examine and question his or her personal beliefs, values, culture, and physical limitations to determine the following: (a) What role should the researcher have with those studied, and (b) what role should the experiences of the researcher have in the

study? Maxwell (2005) recommended writing a “Researcher Identity Memo” to identify the goals, experiences, beliefs, and emotions that connect to the planned research and reflecting on how these have informed and influenced the research (Appendix A).

Phase two – Negotiating entry. Maxwell (2005) stated that negotiating relationships with participants is a key design decision and an essential part of qualitative research methods. Maxwell asserted that the researcher is a formal part of the setting being studied. Consequently, ongoing contact with participants continuously restructures the researcher and participant relationship. According to Maxwell, the relationships are viewed as “negotiating entry.” Maxwell emphasized that the goal of the relationship is to ethically gain from participants the information that can successfully answer the research questions.

To negotiate entry with parents, I asked the pastor of the church initially to recruit parents by distributing a recruitment flyer. I also distributed the flyer in the building attached to the church that housed the preschool/kindergarten program. The flier included a brief outline of the purpose of the study and the intended methodology. I asked the pastor to identify parents who lived in the school district and had school-aged children (Appendix B). I provided contact information to parents interested in participating in the study; I gave those parents who willingly expressed interest in the study an Informed Consent Form that outlined information relevant to the purpose of the study and the intended methodology. I established with the parent a mutually agreeable time, date, and place to conduct the interview. I used telephone calls and e-mails to follow up with the selected parent participants. Before scheduling an interview, I reviewed a copy of the Informed Consent Form with the parent.

Phase three – Data collection. The processes of data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously in grounded theory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and basic qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). I began data collection with initial interview questions based on the literature, experience, and previous fieldwork. Once I began collecting data from participants, I considered all previous ideas about the research topic to be provisional and they were discarded. Interview questions were open ended and allowed the participants ample room to disclose what was important to them. I conducted interviews with participants to the point of data saturation and until I gathered enough information to develop the theoretical model grounded in the interview data.

Interviews. The primary mode of data collection was semistructured interviews with parents. According to Morse and Richards, “the use of semistructured interviews is appropriate when the researcher knows enough about the study topic to frame the needed discussion in advance” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 94). The researchers characterized semistructured interviews as “open-ended questions...developed in advance, along with prepared probes. Unplanned, unanticipated probes may also be used” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 91).

I conducted interviews at a mutually agreeable date, time, and site convenient to the participant and me. I digitally recorded interviews with the informed consent of the participant. Parent interviews took place on different dates, at different times, and at different locations. I recorded interviews on a small digital voice recorder, with the expectation of later transcribing the interview on a personal computer. To protect the identity of the participant, I assigned each parent a number. I did not ask parents if they were members of the church congregation or if their children attended the

preschool/kindergarten program in the building attached to the church where I had posted and distributed the flier. I conducted each interview using the following procedure:

1. At the onset of each interview, I read the Prepared Pre-Interview Statement that introduced me, explained the purpose of the interview, and addressed any concerns with confidentiality.
2. I read the Informed Consent Form to the participant and received verbal consent from the participant.
3. I asked the parent to complete the Parent Demographic Data Sheet.
4. I followed the Interview Protocol and conducted an interview that followed a list of open-ended questions aligned with the research purpose.

Phase four – Data analysis. Morse and Richards (2002) stated that qualitative research is always about discovery. Creswell noted that data analysis “involves preparing data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). Creswell (2007) suggested the following steps to effectively analyze data in a qualitative study:

1. Open coding – The researcher examines the transcript for categories of information supported by the text. The researcher constantly compares and contrasts the categories while continuing to interview and examine the transcripts until categories and subcategories emerge that focus on the “core phenomenon.”
2. Self-reflective memos – To document and enhance the analytic process, to make implicit thoughts explicit, and to expand the data, Creswell suggested

completing analytic memos that consist of questions, musings, and speculations about the data and the emerging theory.

3. Axial coding – The researcher uses the coding process to put the data back together in new ways by making connections between a category and its subcategories. During this phase of the coding process, the researcher will look for common themes among parents and then analyze them for interconnections among the parents studied.
4. Selective coding – This type of coding involves interpreting and searching for statements or phrases that seem essential or that establish relationships among participants’ experiences. Codes and categories are sorted, compared, and contrasted until saturation occurs. Saturation occurs when no new codes or categories emerge and all of the data are accounted for in the core categories.
5. Peer debriefing – A peer debriefer reviews and asks questions about the findings of this study “so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).
6. Representing the data – The researcher makes decisions about ways to present the essence of the participant experiences. The most popular approach in qualitative studies is the use of narrative passage (Creswell, 2003).

Morse and Richards reported that “all coding techniques have the purpose of allowing the researcher to simplify and focus on some specific characteristics of the data and all of them assist the researcher in abstracting or ‘thinking up’ from the data” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 111). The purpose of coding is linking rather than labeling and allows the researcher to think analytically about relationships between the data and the

ideas. Coding requires the researcher to reflect on the data and interpret the meaning of the data. The researcher first systematically collects the data using research protocols and then codes the data to see what patterns and themes emerge.

The researcher has an obligation to be methodical in reporting sufficient details of data collection and the process of analysis to permit others to judge the quality of the resulting product (Patton, 1999). Patton suggested that integrity in analysis requires testing rival explanations:

Once the researcher has described the patterns, linkages, and plausible explanations through inductive analysis, it is important to look for rival or competing themes and explanations. This can be done both inductively and logically. Inductively it involves looking for other ways of organizing the data that might lead to different findings. Logically it means thinking about other logical possibilities and then seeing if those possibilities can be supported by the data. When considering rival organizing schemes and competing explanations the mind-set is not one of attempting to disprove the alternatives; rather, the analyst looks for data that support alternative explanations. Failure to find strong supporting evidence for alternative ways of presenting the data or contrary explanations helps increase confidence in the original, principal explanation generated by the analyst. It is likely that comparing alternative explanations or looking for data in support of alternative patterns will not lead to clear-cut “yes, there is support” versus “no, there is not support” kinds of conclusions. It is a matter of considering the weight of evidence and looking for the best fit between data and analysis. It is important to report what alternative classification systems, themes, and explanations are considered and “tested” during data analysis. This demonstrated intellectual integrity and lends considerable credibility to the final set of findings offered by the evaluator. (Patton, 1999, p. 1191)

Protocols

The interview protocol was a guide, and I varied the protocol as needed to delve into or further clarify participant responses. The participants did not receive the interview questions prior to the interview to extinguish the possibility of their arriving at the interview with prepared answers. I recorded the interview digitally with the

permission of the participant, and I also took notes during the interview. I transcribed all semistructured parent interviews using a personal computer.

I used a semistructured interview protocol to examine the experiences of parents. I designed the protocol to align with the purpose of this study. Merriam noted, “The key to getting good data from interviewing is asking good questions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 95). Merriam (1998) noted that interview questions should serve as a guide that allows the interviewer to collect new data. The researcher suggested moving from requesting relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of the interview to asking more open-ended questions during the interview. Merriam contended that although most interviewers are heavily reliant on the interview protocol during the first few interviews, they eventually can “unhook” themselves from the interview protocol to go with the natural flow of the interview.

Merriam (2009) recommended a pilot interview to try out questions developed in the research protocol. I completed a field test using the draft interview protocol with a parent prior to finalizing the protocol. The field test allowed me to further develop interviewing skills, measure time needed to complete the interview protocol, measure time to complete transcription and coding, and gain feedback on the research design. I designed the field test to examine how parents make school-choice decisions.

For this study, I asked the participants open-ended questions to allow patterns and themes to emerge. I was interested only in the experiences and decision-making processes regarding school choice for this study; therefore, I included only these details in the study.

I conducted the field test to allow me to further develop interviewing skills, measure time needed to complete the interview protocol, and measure time to complete transcription and coding to gain feedback on the research design. The previous field test consisted of 14 questions; the interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and I conducted it at a place, time, and location mutually agreed upon by the participant and me.

I followed the interview protocol exactly and asked only a few clarifying questions of the participant. As a result of the field test, I revised the interview protocol. To avoid redundancy, I moved a few questions to probing questions. I rephrased most questions to make them more open-ended. Merriam suggested moving from asking relatively neutral, descriptive information at the beginning of the interview to more open-ended questions during the interview. I designed the previous and current protocols to examine how parents make school-choice decisions for their children.

Merriam (1998) noted that interview questions should serve as a guide that allows the interviewer to collect new data. Merriam contended that most interviewers are heavily reliant on the interview protocol during the first few interviews but can eventually “unhook” themselves from the interview protocol to go with the natural flow of the interview. During this study, I asked open-ended questions that allowed each participant ample opportunity to share his or her experiences with school-choice decision making as well as to answer any follow-up questions that allowed patterns and themes to emerge. I was interested only in the school choices and decision making of parents for this research study; therefore, I included only the experiences of parents in this study.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The researcher is the instrument through which data are collected and analyzed; the investigator, as a human being, is limited (Merriam, 2009). Subsequently, the researcher's limitations related to being human might include the interference of personal biases, honest mistakes, and missed opportunities during the research process (Merriam, 2009).

It is important for qualitative researchers to employ methods such as peer debriefing and identification of the researcher's bias to establish credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2009). Merriam added that the research findings must be congruent with reality; the findings must capture what is really there. I used peer debriefing and bracketing to establish credibility and trustworthiness in this study. I accomplished peer debriefing by providing written transcripts of the interviews and interpretations to a peer to be sure they accurately reflected the perspective of the participants and to allow for further comments and feedback. I set aside all prejudgments with regard to parent decision making in school choice and bracketed personal experiences involving school choice and the decision-making process (See Appendix A). I relied on data collected through interviews to analyze fairly and objectively the essence of the decision-making process of parents (Creswell, 1998).

Ethical Considerations and Safeguards

Although there was a great deal of research focusing on the motivations of parents to engage in school choice, there was very little research explaining the processes in which parents engage to make school-choice decisions. Threats to internal and external validity existed. Validity, which refers to the trustworthiness of the research and the

research findings, is critical to the design and implementation of a study (Jackson, 2010). Threats of experimental mortality may exist if families decide to discontinue their participation in the study. Threats to external validity are possible because parents are aware of their participation in this investigation; this awareness can have an effect on their responses. I ensured participants of their anonymity. I never asked participants to write their names or any personal information that would reveal their identity.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the methodology and research procedures used to conduct an interpretive qualitative research study on how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children. Additionally, this chapter includes my subjectivity statement as well as descriptions of the study participants. The proceeding chapters discuss the findings of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 4: Results

Overview

The participants in this research study were from a socioeconomically and racially diverse United Methodist church congregation and attached preschool/kindergarten program in an urban–suburban school district, located in a Mid-Atlantic state. This qualitative study utilized a semistructured interview approach to uncover emerging themes from the shared experiences of parents who (a) lived in the urban–suburban school district in a specific Mid-Atlantic state in which the study took place, (b) currently had one or more children at schools of choice or who were entering the educational marketplace for the first time, and (c) volunteered to participate in this research study.

Merriam's (2009) basic interpretative qualitative study research design guided the work of the study, with the research goals of (a) gaining a better understanding of a parent's perspective of school-choice decision making and (b) minimizing an existing gap in the literature on the decision making process that parents undertake to make school-choice decisions for their children. The goals directly related to the primary research question: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? The subsequent questions that followed were the following: What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children? How do parents gather information about the schools that are available to their children? How do parents choose the schools that best fit their children? The goals, along with the theoretical framework—rational choice theory, parental role construction, and parent self-efficacy—and the methodology, frame and relate to the research questions inextricably throughout this basic interpretive qualitative study (Table 1).

Table 1. *Research Question Alignment to Theoretical Framework and Interview Questions*

Research questions	Theoretical Framework	Interview questions
How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children?	Rational choice theory	
What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children?	Parental role construction theory and rational choice theory	<p>What type of school does your child currently attend?</p> <p>Did you choose this school among others, or were you assigned to this school?</p> <p>What schools were available to you?</p> <p>What are the most important things you want in a school?</p> <p>What factors did you consider when choosing your child’s school?</p> <p>Were these factors given equal weight?</p>
How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children?	Parental self-efficacy	<p>How did you gather information about the schools available to your child?</p> <p>What sources were used to gather information?</p> <p>How accessible was the information about the school?</p> <p>To what extent did you feel your resources were reliable?</p>

<p>How do parents choose the school that best fits their children?</p>	<p>Rational choice theory, parental self-efficacy, and parental role construction theory</p> <p>Rational choice theory</p> <p>Rational choice theory and parental self-efficacy</p> <p>Parental role construction theory and parental self-efficacy</p>	<p>How did you make a decision about the school that best fit your preferences?</p> <p>What characteristics about your child aid in your decision making?</p> <p>To what extent do you feel comfortable making decisions about your child's school?</p> <p>To what extent do you feel you made the right decision?</p> <p>Are you satisfied with the variety of school choices available to you?</p> <p>What types of schools or programs would you suggest for your school district?</p>
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The theoretical framework emanated from the literature: parental role construction—how parents decide to become involved in their children’s education and participate in the educational market place; parental self-efficacy—how equipped parents feel to make decisions on school choice; and, rational choice theory—how parents make the best decisions considering their options.

I used criterion purposeful sampling to determine participants for the study. According to Maxwell, purposeful selection deliberately engages particular individuals who are able to supply information that may not be available from others (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Triangulation of theories, the use of an outside transcriber, respondent validation during occasional second-round interviews, and peer review of coding procedures reduced threats to validity and credibility of the data.

Within the context of parents’ decision making and school choice, parental role construction, parental self-efficacy, and rational choice theory, the spirit of how parents make school-choice decisions is presented through the experiences of those who have chosen to engage in the educational market place. I reduced the interview data through a coding process to prepare the data for analysis. Therefore, themes emerged as parents described their experiences and provided their perspectives of the school-choice process in which they engaged. Multiple component themes emerged that related to the major themes as the interview data were further reduced. Coding of the qualitative data allowed the researcher to work through the data analysis process and begin to share the experiences of these parents.

Organization of Interview Process

This study of how parents make school-choice decisions involved semistructured, face-to-face interviews using an open-ended interview protocol. To generate a diverse sample of potential participants who met the criteria of the study, I employed criterion purposeful sampling of a diverse United Methodist church congregation and attached preschool/kindergarten program in a Mid-Atlantic state.

Merriam wrote,

In criterion-based selection you first decide what attributes of your sample are crucial to your study and then find people or sites that meet those criteria. The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases. You not only spell out the criterion that you use, but you also say why the criteria are important. (Merriam, 2015, p. 98)

In November 2014, the week before Thanksgiving, I placed a recruitment flyer (Appendix B) throughout the church fellowship hall, offices, Sunday school classrooms, restrooms, and the preschool/kindergarten classrooms attached to the church. There were no respondents throughout the months of November and early December of 2014. The first potential participant communicated her interest in mid-December 2014 and scheduled her interview for early January 2015; Participant 01 followed through with her interview as scheduled in early January 2015. There were no other interviews scheduled until late March 2015. When completing the respondent validation with Participant 01, I inquired about the best way to gain entry into the church and school community. Participant 01 agreed to share her experience with her church peers. She also agreed to share the letter with parents (Appendix C). A total of 35 participants were given parent letters inviting them to participate in the study, including Participant 01. Initially, 30 positive respondents replied, indicating their willingness to participate. A

communication was sent to the positive respondents in the form of a follow-up e-mail describing the study and soliciting possible dates, times, and locations for scheduling interviews and seeking telephone contact information for a follow-up planning discussion.

I sent a second follow-up e-mail to eight potential participants who did not respond to the follow-up e-mail, again describing the study and soliciting possible dates, times, and locations to schedule interviews, and seeking telephone contact information for a follow-up planning discussion. Four of the initial 30 affirmative respondents in the first group, who received parent letters to participate, never followed through with scheduling an interview and/or final participation even though correspondence via e-mail indicated that the potential participant was interested in being involved in the study. Three of the initial 30 affirmative respondents in the first group, who received parent letters to participate, were not eligible to participate in the study because they did not meet the criteria. Two respondents' children had graduated from high school, and the other respondent did not live in the county. Finally, a total of 20 participants engaged in the interview process, including the initial Participant 01 who volunteered after viewing the recruitment flier and 19 of the 30 participants who received the parent letter via e-mail.

Some respondents referred other respondents to the study, thereby resulting in a snowball sampling technique. Snowball, chain, or network sampling is perhaps the most common form of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2015, p. 98). The strategy involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria that you have established for participation in the study (Merriam, 2015, p. 98). I did not ask respondents if they were

members of the church congregation or if they had children who attended the preschool/kindergarten program that was in the building attached to the church; therefore, whether they were members of the church congregation or school community was unknown.

I contacted each interview participant by phone to determine the best date and time to meet as well as a convenient location for the participant. To assure strict confidentiality, interviews took place in coffee shops, libraries, personal offices or places of employment, personal residences, and meeting rooms at their children's schools or extracurricular activities. Participants made the final decision as to where the interviews would take place. Two interviews took place at a coffee shop or restaurant, one at a library near the participant's home, seven interviews at the participants' personal residences, five interviews at the participants' personal offices or places of employment, one interview in my personal office, two interviews each in a meeting room at the participant's child's school, and two interviews each at the child's extracurricular activity location.

After brief introductions, I provided the participant with the pre-interview statement (Appendix E) and asked him or her to read along as it was reviewed. I then gave the participant a written copy of the informed consent form (Appendix G) and reviewed its contents. I addressed any additional questions about the study. I left the original for the participant to keep in the event that the participant wanted to reference the document or contact anyone with further questions. I also gave the participant a parent demographic data sheet (Appendix H) to complete. I filed the parent demographic data sheet for later analysis.

I prepared a binder with the consent documents, parent demographic data sheets, interview protocols with handwritten field notes from each participant's interview, and the verbatim transcript of the interview and any changes recommended through the respondent validation or peer debriefing process. I requested permission to audio tape the interviews, and I gave each interviewee a number to protect his or her identity and to assure anonymity. I kept all documents in a secure location according to The George Washington University IRB requirements.

During the interviews, some participants appeared to be nervous or uncomfortable in speaking about their experiences. After they completed the parent demographic data sheet, I gave participants preliminary questions to warm up for the more open-ended interview questions. From this point of entry, each participant recalled his or her experiences with choosing the child's current school. Each participant provided a series of accounts, ranging from when they first engaged in the educational marketplace until the current time. Many participants described future expectations and anticipation as they continued to engage in the educational marketplace. These participants were very proactive in their thinking, discussing plans for their children's next moves in transitioning to middle or high school.

The bracketing of gestures, mannerisms, and body language noted during the interviews revealed some enthusiastic and critical thinking engagement by participants in the reflection of their own experiences and considerations. I noted these observances in the margins of the interview protocol. As necessary, I interjected or repeated questions from the interview protocol, or as my interest was piqued, to continue the dialogue, clarify points already made by the participant, or probe for a deeper understanding.

Five themes emerged to reveal how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children. As a result of the preliminary analysis of codes and topics, 19 topics emerged. Upon further analysis, I reduced these topics to five major themes with component parts identified under each theme. I noted while journaling, “Multiple themes exist after the third interview. Refer back to themes to see if they become a lesser category (mentioned less frequently) grouped under a larger category (mentioned more frequently).”

Participant Demographics

I used a demographic data sheet to acquire demographic information about each participant, identifying each interviewee throughout the study solely as Participant with an assigned number. I gathered responses to demographic questions with regard to age, gender, race, highest level of education completed, employment status, marital status, number of children, and grade band of each child. The demographic questions revealed a range of number of children and grade bands.

The 20 participants’ ages ranged from 32 to 50. Two participants held high school diplomas and two participants held bachelor’s degrees. Nine participants had earned graduate degrees, whereas another nine participants held doctoral degrees. Of the two participants who held high school diplomas, one had completed a year and a half of college course work and the other was in his last year of earning a bachelor’s degree. Two of the participants with graduate degrees were current doctoral candidates. Of the two participants with doctorates, one was an attorney and the other a physician.

The 20 participants had children in all grade bands from pre-k to high school. One participant was the parent of an infant, one of a child in college, and two participants

were parents of high school graduates. Eight parents each had one child, nine parents each had two children, and three parents had three children each. The maximum number of children for one parent was three.

Of the 20 participants, 15 were married, 4 divorced, and 1 single. All but one participant was employed. One participant was a business owner. There were seven male participants and thirteen female participants. Sixteen participants were African American, three Caucasian, and one Asian.

Demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Demographic Information*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Level of highest degree	Employment status	Marital status	# of children	Grade band
01	47	F	Afr Amer	Bachelor's	Employed	M	3	HS Grad, HS, MS
02	37	F	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Employed	D	1	HS
03	45	F	Afr Amer	Master's	Employed	D	2	College, HS
04	47	F	Afr Amer	2 Master's	Employed	M	1	ES
05	46	F	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Employed	S	1	HS
06	43	F	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Employed	D	1	HS
07	48	F	Caucasian	Master's	Employed	M	2	HS, MS
08	43	F	Afr Amer	High School	Employed	M	2	HS Grad, MS
09	41	M	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Employed	M	2	Day Care, ES
10	42	F	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Unemployed	M	3	ES (2), PreK
11	37	F	Caucasian	Doctorate	Employed	M	1	ES
12	36	M	Afr Amer	Master's	Employed	M	2	ES
13	43	F	Afr Amer	Master's	Employed	D	1	ES
14	43	M	Afr Amer	High School	Employed	M	3	HS, ES, PreK
15	33	M	Afr Amer	Master's	Employed	M	1	ES
16	40	F	Afr Amer	Doctorate	Employed	M	2	ES
17	44	M	Caucasian	Master's	Employed	M	2	ES
18	32	F	Asian	Master's	Employed	M	2	ES
19	50	M	Afr Amer	Bachelor's	Employed	M	1	ES
20	46	M	Afr Amer	Master's	Employed	M	2	HS, MS

Interview Process

Following the completion of the parent demographic sheet and the warm-up questions, the initial question asked each participant to describe the enrollment process or any expectations involved in enrolling in his or her child's school. Many of the probes did not have to be asked specifically, as participants shared this information naturally and comfortably when describing their experiences. I used probes only to solicit additional clarification as needed. I transcribed Participant Interviews 01, 02, 19, and 20. An outside individual who was not associated with this study transcribed Participant Interviews 4-18. I added each transcript document to the binder divided by participant. I also added changes noted during peer debriefing to the transcript when necessary. One interviewee requested to review the transcript because she wanted her spouse to see it. There were no changes; however, the participant wanted to qualify two statements that were made. She thought the statements needed clarity because she was uncomfortable with the tone in which it was stated.

Researcher Memos and Bracketing

I began the data analysis process by providing a full description of my own experience in making decisions for my children within the educational marketplace. This process helped with setting aside prejudgments and allowed me to approach the interviews and the overall research with a receptive presence (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). During the epoché process, I recalled my own personal experiences with making school-choice decisions. This bracketing procedure evoked emotions felt when I first made the decision to move my son from his private preschool to his current public school with a specialty (Montessori) program. This caused me to remember the factors (mostly

financial) my husband and I considered and the options we weighed to come to our final decision. Additionally it caused me to consider those to whom I reached out to gather information to make informed decisions. Using a graphic organizer and narrative journaling, I continuously reflected on and mapped out past experiences and more recent experiences. The process enabled me to move toward openness, and I was able to approach each interview with clarity. With great focus, I listened intently to each participant's story without coloring his or her message with my own thinking, feeling, and seeing (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004).

Throughout the interview process, I kept a journal of field notes that did not directly pertain to a particular participant interview. I documented most field notes in the margins of the interview protocol or on a printed copy of Table 1, a document that I used to ensure that I addressed all protocol and probing questions. Saldana (2013) suggested coding as one collects and formats one's data. When writing up field notes, transcribing recorded interviews, or filling out documents gathered from the site, the researcher should jot down any preliminary words or phrases for codes on the notes, transcripts, or documents themselves, or write them as an analytic memo or entry in a research journal for future reference (Saldana, 2013 p. 20).

Notes that were related to the participant interview were written on the interview protocol or on Table 1. The notes during the participant interviews included details about the setting, nonverbal behaviors, and connections identified from one interview to the next. Themes began to emerge even among the first three interviews. After completing the first two verbatim transcriptions, I noted some of my thoughts as I recalled the

specific parts of each interview. While reading and rereading transcripts, I began making connections mentally from one interview to the next as common themes emerged.

Theming the Data

Saldana's (2013) procedures for "theming the data" provided insight into the analytic processes. Several qualitative methodologists have recommended labeling and thus analyzing portions of data with an extended thematic statement rather than a shorter code (Saldana, 2013 p. 175). With this step of the analysis, verbatim statements identified in the transcripts presented a range of perspectives about the parents' experiences that were labeled and analyzed with an extended thematic statement.

Tables 3-7 show samples of significant verbatim statements extracted from the participant interviews for each theme and component theme. The selected statements represent unique examples uncovered during the data reduction process. The samples include individual verbatim statements shared by the parents. These statements represent nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping significant statements from interview questions.

The next step in the analysis included carefully examining the significant verbatim statements and clustering the statements into themes. With this step, I reviewed each transcript individually by participant and reduced the data by deleting statements irrelevant to the topic and statements that were repeated or overlapping. To pull out these significant statements, I read and reread transcripts and listened to recorded interviews several times. The commonalities that I mentally noted from interviews began to form a visual picture across the interview transcripts, as I began this identification of the topics emerging from the interviews. I created a table with topics listed horizontally at the top of the page as they emerged and participant identification numbers along the left side. As

I moved through each interview transcript, the list grew to 19 different topics that emerged from the verbatim words or thematic statements from the first interview to the last interview.

During the next stages of the process, I carefully examined the major topics and grouped redundant topics together to form themes. The emergence of the 5 major themes and 14 component themes from the verbatim statements of interview participants triggered an additional analytical question in my thinking. I was interested in the extent to which the themes that emerged were related to the research questions. As a result, I later placed the research questions that were related to the verbatim statements as a heading at the top of each page with each major theme.

After processing the verbatim statements from each participant's interview transcript and aligning the research questions to the participants' responses, it became necessary to determine which themes provided the strongest evidence to answer the research question: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban-suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children—specifically, what factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children, how do parents gather information about the schools available to their children, and how do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences? Participants provided rich, thick descriptions related to the numerous topics, which were reduced to five themes. After aligning the themes with the respective research questions, I organized the themes based upon the frequency of terms consistently identified in the verbatim responses of the participants.

The Parents' Experiences

I chronicled the experiences of 20 parents who engaged in making school-choice decisions in the educational marketplace through the use of verbatim transcripts in response to an interview protocol designed to answer the question: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children—specifically, what factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children, how do parents gather information about the schools available to their children, and how do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences? Each parent met the following criteria for the study: (a) lived in an urban–suburban school district in a Mid-Atlantic state, (b) currently had one or more children at schools of choice or were entering the educational marketplace for the first time.

The educational marketplace was open to all who chose to access it in the urban–suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic state chosen for this study. Parents who chose to participate did so for a variety of reasons identified in the verbatim transcripts of this study. As a result, they had experienced successes and failures while identifying what they wanted for their child(ren). The lived experiences described by the participants during interviews were filled with examples in which the parent participated in making school-choice decisions. The parents' responses revealed many layers of experiences with schools, perceptions of schools, and reflections on their own educational experiences as well as the experiences of other children in their families or social and professional networks.

The theme *expectations* emerged from the personal stories of participants as the strongest theme for understanding the main research question: How do parents from a

diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? *Experiences* and *responsibility* were the strongest themes for understanding the question: What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children? *Access* was the strongest theme for understanding the question: How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children? Finally, *decision making* was the strongest theme that surfaced to shed light upon the research question: How do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences? I revealed these themes in greater detail through the vignettes expressed in participants’ own words excerpted from interview transcripts.

Expectations

The theme of *parents’ expectations* was the strongest theme for understanding the research question: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? *Academics/curriculum*, *culture/safety*, and *school reputation* were component themes that emanated from the verbatim participant responses. Equal access, rigor, targeted programming (STEM, advanced placement, arts, language immersion, etc.), and diversity were specific responses from the 20 participants regarding the component theme *academics/curriculum*. Safe and orderly, social elements, school size, nurturing, welcoming, professional, and faith based were specific responses regarding the component theme *culture/safety*. Finally, graduation rate, test scores, career and college readiness and acceptance, qualified teachers and administrators, and success of special programs were specific responses from 20 participants regarding the component theme *school achievement data*.

Under the component theme *academics/curriculum*, six participants shared that they hoped the school district would provide equal access to academic programs and implementation of the curriculum. Eleven participants expected their schools to provide a rigorous curriculum and instructional programs, and 12 participants preferred programs targeted to a variety of content areas. Although the respondents discussed diversity in seven of the interviews, they did not mention it as a priority throughout the other 14 interview transcripts.

Factors regarding the school's social elements emerged as a component theme for *culture/safety*. Eight participants described the social elements of discipline, respect, behavior, and relationships in their primary responses. Many parents appeared to be confident about the safe and orderly environment of the schools that were available to them, as only five parents described their expectations in this area. Similarly, four parents mentioned school and class size and a nurturing and motivating environment as expectations. Three parents expected a welcoming and professional environment at their children's school. Four participants did not have responses to fit this component theme.

Success in school achievement data fell on the lower end of the component themes because most parents did not identify it as an expectation. A few parents suggested that they had expectations for the success rate of students' being college and career ready and two mentioned the importance of graduation rate. The same parents had expectations for teacher and administrator qualifications.

Table 3. *Theme and Supporting Statements for Parent Expectations*

Theme	Supporting statements from parents
Expectations	Academic/Curriculum
- Parental Self-Efficacy	“Equal access to the same programs to all the kids in the county”
	“I just wish that the things that they gave to students at one school, they give to all of the students.”
	“I want my daughter to be challenged based on what she knows; I need something that’s going to push her from where she is.”
	“I want equal access for all children, not just a few.”
	“A wide variety of opportunities”
	“solid academic curriculum, challenging”
	“Equal access to special programs that provide challenging and engaging curriculum”
	“My daughter has a learning disability. My expectation was she receives a quality education that meets her emotional and instructional needs.”
	Culture/Safety
	“A safe and orderly environment is important.”
	“My son has a health impairment. I was very concerned of ensuring he would be at a school where appropriate support would be provided if he were in a health crisis.”
	“I don’t think the private schools on the high school level can offer as much as the high schools can offer, things that you would cherish in high school, like homecoming, football games, more course selection.”

“I feel like our school system can’t address to the degree that I feel comfortable with some of the social elements. Environment plays a big part; there’s quite a challenge facing the school system around ‘How do you control the behaviors?’ I believe the public school system can educate all children. I do think it faces challenges that smaller or private schools don’t face. Public schools can’t select. You have to serve everybody. I do a lot to try to protect and bring my child up in a certain environment. I don’t want her to go to school and get all the things that I’m trying to protect her from. I want a nurturing environment. I want a protected environment. But I can’t go to work if I’m worried about my daughter’s safety.”

“Size was a huge factor; her school was a little intimidating because she would have been in a high school class of about 70 versus a high school class of 615.”

“I wanted him in an environment with kids who are motivated.”

“An appropriately nurturing environment; all students can somehow be recognized not just necessarily those who achieve honor roll or perfect attendance.”

“The principal was warm and inviting and answered my questions as did the secretary. The staff was very professional and friendly.”

“I like that they do things in the classroom. They do things outside the classroom. There’s a lot of movement that keeps her interested.”

“School size was very important. My daughter was in a very small private school. We wanted her to go to something similar. With my sister's help, we were able to find a small middle school that fit the model of her private school.”

“Faith is very important to me and my husband. My girls are able to attend school, pray, and know that no one is going to judge them because they are believers.”

School achievement data

“It’s obviously the graduation rate, which is a part of the overall success or failure of the school as far as high-stakes testing is concerned; how many kids are getting jobs or going to college? What are they doing after they leave school? What do they actually know? Can they talk about what they know? That’s what I think about when I say school performance.”

“Qualified teachers and administration”

“I was looking at the success rate in students getting into college. I looked at the history of the school and their success. I did a little bit of looking into the number of teachers who had advanced degrees beyond a bachelor’s.”

“Reputation of the school was important; one thing that’s important to me, it’s my son’s teachers. What’s the level – how long have the teachers been there? You know, what’s their level of education? You know, I mean are they fresh out of school, just first-year teachers? Are they seasoned teachers? Are they kind of mid-career teachers? All of it’s relevant.”

“Very trained and qualified teachers, very strong principal and vice principal”

“The reputation of the school was important.”

Access

Access was the second major theme that emerged from the verbatim interview transcripts. The gathered information provided an understanding of the research question: How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children? The component themes identified were *choice*, *specialty school/program*, and *sources of information*. These component themes frequently emerged from the participant responses. All 20 participants made statements regarding their choice process. Many participants mentioned that they had several school options outside of the “neighborhood” or boundary school from which to choose including; local private schools, district charter and specialty programs, and the special transfer to your school of choice if there was space available; however, they expressed concerns that those options were limited due to lottery entrance expectations, entrance exams, school enrollment, financial restraints, transportation, and/or wait lists. Most often, parents suggested that the entrance expectations were a deterrent to the choice process.

Five parents lacked faith in the lottery, having been waitlisted in previous lotteries for the same school system or having heard negative responses about the lottery from their social networks. Seventeen parents never considered their boundary school as an option. After being waitlisted previously, five parents entered or continued with private or parochial programs, all of whom claimed they would continue to enter the lottery until their child either “gets in” or graduates. For most parents, the “neighborhood school” was not an option unless it housed a particular academic program or curriculum that met the parents’ expectations. Two parents—one of a high school student, and one preparing

for middle school—chose their residence based on the reputation of the school when they were purchasing their home.

The second component theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was *current school program*. All but 1 of the 20 parents interviewed had students in schools of choice. Fifteen parents chose their students' schools based on the academic program and/or the curriculum that met their expectations. Although the other five participants were parents of students in their boundary schools, only four of the parents actively chose to send them there; one parent perceived that there were no other options. Two parents chose to live in a neighborhood because of the school program and curriculum available when they purchased their home. One parent believed the boundary school was more convenient geographically than all of her other choice options. One parent left the private school to “give the neighborhood school a chance,” and one parent did not gain access to any of the other private, parochial, or charter schools in which he was interested.

The last component theme that emerged from the data was *sources of information*. The responses shed light on how parents gathered information that was available to them and what type of information parents perceived to be most reliable. Parents were more likely to visit the school's website to access information regarding the school's academic programs and achievement. Half of the parents interviewed were past or present educators. These parents believed they were well aware of the school options available to them both inside and outside their school districts. Some of the information of which they were aware included academic programs, curriculum, school achievement data, teacher qualifications, lottery and entrance expectations, and special transfer procedures.

The most frequent sources of information that parents used to learn about the schools available to them were the school website, open house/school visits, and word of mouth of family and friends. Parents who were past or present educators in the public schools believed they were able to navigate the district/school website because of their frequent use of the website. Five of these parents perceived that the district's website was not user friendly to parents who were not educators within the school system. Parents who were not educators within the public school system had no expectations for the district/school website. These parents relied heavily on word of mouth from neighbors, family, friends, and associated community organizations. One parent described the primary use of a blog for mothers whose sole purpose was to learn specific details about schools in their area from mothers whose children attended the schools. Two parents described negative experiences with teachers, administration, and peers with older children at "the neighborhood school" and were therefore adamant about younger children not attending. Three of the interviewed parents never accessed the school district's website as attending any of the district schools was never an option.

Table 4. *Theme and Supporting Statements for Access*

Theme	Supporting statements from parents
Access - Rational Choice Theory	Choice
	<p>“I had several choices: however she didn’t get enough points... She missed it by two points. We also applied for ... which she got waitlisted. Where she is now was our third choice. Neighborhood school was not a choice.”</p>
	<p>“No, neither school is my assigned boundaries school based on my address. Having multiple options outside of the school boundary was soothing to me.” Options because of son’s academic success; I would definitely say that there are a lot more choices than had been available in the last 10 years; they are not readily available to me based on my address.”</p>
	<p>“Boundary school and two private schools, I definitely don’t think there were enough public school choices available to me; you pretty much have to go to the school that’s in your neighborhood; there were some options available for private school. If you’re willing to put that much money into it, there are quite a few options available.”</p>
	<p>“We were really torn because we were looking at our boundary public school; there was one other private school that we were considering, but honestly it was the only one that we really had ever seriously pursued; I guess any and all. I did apply for her to be in the county’s Montessori Program.”</p>
	<p>“I moved to the area because of the high school when she was a year old; and decided if nothing else, high school being probably the best option in the county is how I chose that one.”</p>
	<p>“There were a lot of great choices out there and there still are. Um...I guess the real problem is just in that it’s a lottery and we have so many families who are interested in those programs.”</p>
	<p>“Based on the rigorous curriculum; the comprehensive/boundary schools, considered private schools; she has literally been on the waiting list for the tag school since 2nd grade.”</p>
	<p>“Private, charter, public (neighborhood); did not consider specialty schools because the process seemed a little more uncomfortable than we wanted to deal with at the time. It was either we put him in a public school or we take him to a private school.”</p>

“On the private side the types of Montessori schools that I was looking for, they were so expensive. I mean very expensive and because mine are fairly close together we were trying to decide if we wanted to invest in a private education early on or later on like high school.”

“Our district has choice, so access was not an issue.”

Special program student attends

“She was part of magnet program. She’s in a biotech magnet program.”

“Comprehensive high school that has academic academies, honors strand of the school”

“Public school, biotechnology program”

“It is our neighborhood high school, magnet program within the school, local equivalent to the science and tech program. The school has a science and tech program, but because we are within the school boundaries, program was designed for students who live within boundaries who meet the same criteria minus the test scores, and a grade point average 3.5 or higher from their middle school. It gives them the same classes and options as science and tech without having to take the test because we are within boundary. Now if they didn’t have the program I probably would’ve never put her in public school. She would’ve probably remained in private school.”

“Science and tech program. These are the kids who are typically motivated, kind of self-driven, know what they’re supposed to do in school and do it.”

“Science and tech charter school; she has been identified as tagged”

“Montessori, I was really interested in the public Montessori because it’s people from all walks of life.”

“The school has a pre-IB program. I would like my student to be pre-IB and college and career ready. The pre-IB program shows that the administration is focused on advancing the education for all students.”

“Because my daughter was transitioning from private school to public school we wanted to ensure there was well-defined program that included fine arts and extracurricular activities.”

“The school program includes a lot of diversity. There are opportunities for fine arts and athletics. Also, there is a program for women in medicine that allows students to earn college credit while still in high school. All of those programs supported what my husband and I wanted for our daughters”

Sources of information

“School’s website, the county’s website, and the information session that was held at the middle school... very accessible”

“I have a knowledge base that maybe the general parent doesn’t. I knew there would be other options to request a special transfer; I had first-hand knowledge of school performance just because I work in the department that deals with school performance; interactions with friends and family who had bad experiences with schools that are on my end of the community; observations from visiting schools in both a professional and personal role. I think the information is very accessible.”

“I have some knowledge of the program; that was very important for me. The Internet was a source in terms of the two private schools I was looking at. Family recommendations, friend recommendations; pretty accessible. Most of the information was available online; pamphlet about the coursework; the coordinator was available as well; very reliable because they’ve had children who had gone through the biotech program and the private schools.”

“They put the signs up in the community; I am a parent has always researched sites; spring festival at our boundary school; formally through friends; seeing it posted around.”

“The neighborhood, on different parenting and family magazines pretty accessible. A lot of times I would see the public school site was outdated; there could have been more on the public side. I haven’t seen anything that didn’t pan out to be true or something; we went to visit the school.”

“I definitely asked the other parents what they thought about the different school communities, those who had kids go through. I’m big on people and their experiences; accessibility of people who’ve had their kids go there. I’ve seemed to have found people in different circles whose kids have gone to that school; the lottery handbook. Anytime I read something online I always question it.”

As an eighth grader, I knew about her school and one other when I was moving to the county—and this is strictly from conversations from friends I went to college with who had gone to both schools, and people who I work with whose kids had gone to both schools—and her school was just a better option. I did a lot of online research; X number of teachers who have advanced degrees and AP statistics. I used state data. I used the school’s website. I had more data for the public school than I did for the private school; pretty reliable. I’m a data person so the data—I can kind of read between the lines, but I rely a lot on personal experiences.”

“District website; word of mouth; certain people’s experiences with others may or may not always be the same. You know a periodic visit to a school may not be a true representation; it might only be a snapshot. Other parents in the community can also be a great resource, whether it’s church or the neighbors; I think it’s fairly easy to find the information; quite reliable.”

“I had researched online. I have known people to attend their other campus in northern county, word of mouth. Schools that they may have been enrolled in, their experiences and just gathering information that way, past experience with previous child, gathering whatever they really have to offer. I know that if the school is putting something into their website that tells me a little more about that school because that means that they are really trying to reach out and give information to their parents and incoming parents; very reliable.”

“The school website, the county website. I had to look for it, because it’s on the county site, but it’s kind of buried so it’s not readily there. You’ve got to look for it.”

“I looked at the free lunch numbers and I also—I did look at the test scores, but I had already; I’ve already seen students that have matriculated through here that have been very successful. I went online, they list the—like I said, the free lunch numbers; they list the test scores and the different grades and the different subject areas; and they list the level of education that the teachers have; word of mouth. Just, those that were employed in the county that maybe had a relationship with the guidance counselor or knew someone who taught here before. I think to me it was accessible because of my relationships with the community, but I don’t know that a lot of it is accessible to just someone that, I don’t know, who doesn’t really probe further. Very reliable.”

“We looked at the website that was outdated. We also looked at the data and met with parents in the community to make a true decision.”

“I have several sources of information but I do some of the research myself. My wife is from DC and when I came to DC she helped me with a lot of this information. I also talked with a few friends to help me make decisions.”

“The website, um...I think has changed since then at the time, and the website was not very user friendly, but I think um...through Google search we were able to find it, um...and I believe once we got to the information about the enrollment process, it was pretty clear.”

“The county websites are a bit outdated. I would like to see them update their website to facilitate better communication. The county does have—it’s like a flea market where all the schools come to a school. And they showcase what they have. They have a choice as to whether or not they go or not. And a lot of times the boundary schools don’t go for whatever reason. And I think they probably should reconsider that. But a lot of the schools that have specialty programs and lotteries and everything are usually there. And they have showcases. It’s called a showcase. And they have ’em annually. But they have ’em in one part of the county every year. They may have it at Roosevelt. I know last year it was at Flowers and Wise. And this year it was at Oxon Hill. So they’ll probably go back up north next year and still kinda rotate it. But they’re open to everyone.”

“We used a variety of sources—the school website (which was not very good), a shadow day, and my sister—to make a decision regarding the school. My daughter knew a few students at the school, which helped in our decision.”

“Word of mouth, shadow day, the school's website, and data”

Responsibility

The third major theme to emerge from the data, *responsibility*, provided evidence for the research question: What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children? The three component themes that emerged from the verbatim participant interviews included; *meeting needs*, *knowing the child*, and *parent roles*. All but three parents spoke specifically about the importance of identifying a school to meet the needs of their child(ren). Although most parents spoke of meeting the needs of their students in terms of rigorous and challenging curriculum, three parents explained how important it was that their children's school meets their needs socially. These parents expressed comfort in the instructional program and were therefore more concerned with the social aspects of the school and a diverse population of students. One parent described her participation in the special transfer process was due to what she believed to be a school where "the students were out of control" and occasional instances when her child was bullied. One parent described her child as exceptional with special needs. As a result, she had been more concerned with a safe environment that was nurturing for her son.

The data that emerged from the verbatim interview transcripts revealed the second component theme to responsibility: *knowing the child*. All of the interviewed parents described the importance of knowing their child as a factor in choosing a school for their child. Parents described searching for schools that met their children's academic interests, cultivated their extracurricular interests, fit their personality, supported their motivation to succeed, provided a place where they could adapt, challenged them to succeed, provided healthy competition among peers, and consistently engaged them in learning. Parents who felt strongly about meeting their child(ren)'s needs also spoke to

how important it was that they knew their child in order to meet those needs. One parent commented, “I am his father, I should know him better than anyone.” Another parent stated, “When it’s time to pick a school, this is what you should look for. Not because you think that that’s the best, but because it’s the best that works for your child.”

The last component theme to emerge under responsibility was *roles*. This component theme emerged from participant responses that helped the researcher understand how parents saw their roles in the choice process. Responses of six parents did not classify under this component theme. One parent stated, “I truly believe the job of a parent is not just to pick a school, but to map out your child’s life.” Another parent stated, “You’re supposed to give them a better life than what you had. That’s the goal.” One parent commented, “I feel like my contributions to society are numerous, but I feel like there will be none greater than whatever it is I do with my child.” Other parents identified themselves as engaged and informed, partners with the school and teachers, and their child’s first teacher. One parent stated, “If there is something they’re not getting at school, it’s not ideal, but it’s something my husband can help out with at home.” Two parents mentioned that they depend on a close friend or family members who are educators to keep them informed of the trends and changes in their school district that affect their children because it is their responsibility to be informed.

Table 5. *Themes and Supporting Statements for Responsibility*

Theme	Supporting statements from parents
Responsibility - Parental Role Construction	Meeting needs
	<p>“If she was more of a follower, I definitely would not have her in a school where the culture is horrible versus with her personality in a school that allows her opportunities to be a leader to do what she wants to do and not sway with the crowd.”</p>
	<p>“To ensure as a parent and as a school, instructional program would move him to where he needs to be as far as being prepared for college and career”</p>
	<p>“She does STEM things and stuff like that. When we decided to put her in these things early on, I think it’s always been with the knowledge that you have to do more. I don’t think parents can totally expect the school system to educate their children solely. I think that’s always a joint responsibility and honestly a first for parents.”</p>
	<p>“She needed to be challenged academically, and I felt that the school would give her that.”</p>
	<p>“Traditional schools have not really met the needs of my son, and unfortunately I don’t think any traditional school will do that; learning is so much bigger than just what happens at the school. Could’ve been some private school options that would have fit his learning style better. I’m going to make sure that he’s fine, that he has what he needs, that he learns what he needs to learn.”</p>
	<p>“That’s not an ideal situation for him all day, and so he was really quite bored all day. For a kid who is already feeling detached, that just sets him further and further out to sea.”</p>
	<p>“I want to see her struggle a little bit because that means that there’s a challenge there. That she’s learning something. That she has to try a little harder. If she’s coming home and she is able to just complete her homework and continue on. There is not a challenge there. There’s nothing pushing her. There is nothing really motivating her to know more, be more.”</p>

“I want them to have a choice when they’re applying to college. That’s a big thing for me, too. I want them to have options and choices.”

“We wanted her to be safe and get the instruction she needs with standards-based education.”

“Anything to keep her motivated, anything that keeps her brain stimulated and anything that feeds her eagerness to learn”

“I can’t say all of my child’s needs will be met, but as long as he is progressing academically, I am ok with that.”

“I want her to struggle but not too much, because I am sensitive to her needs of being adopted. Her struggles are opportunities to defy the odds.”

Knowing the child

“The interest in terms of what she wants for herself”

“So that led me to look for schools that met his academic interests. After health is just his personality; he’s a lot wiser beyond his years. Academically, I think I was able to confirm around middle school that he was a student that could be successful academically; science and tech was always the first choice because he’s interested in engineering and forensic science.”

“He is somewhat interested in the STEM field in the area of engineering and science; his drive and motivation to succeed and his ability to adapt.”

“I think emotionally she’s still very much her actual age. But academically, she’s probably two grades ahead.”

“It just makes sense for the science and tech program since he wanted to be an engineer. He’s a hands-on learner; he’s always been motivated to learn, but I will say that I’ve noticed over the years his motivation has unfortunately dwindled a bit.”

“Personalities and knowing when they’re just griping to gripe because it’s school or knowing when something is really an issue and then also as I mentioned earlier, knowing when the kids are capable of doing more than they’re being asked to do. My youngest, he is much more of a willing student.”

“She’s into a lot of activity and she’s very, very social. But at the same time she needs that rigorous environment; she’s very curious, she’s extremely smart, she’s engaged in things. That played a big part into me making those decisions.”

“He’s pretty independent, but also he needs structure, give him a task and he follows it.”

“My child is sometimes difficult; however, if given a task he can complete it. It just takes time.”

“My child is very independent,. I wanted her to be at a school that allows her to be curious and a school to develop her curiosity.”

“My little girl is friendly. If you give her a task, she will complete it and ask for more.”

“The girls are friendly and independent. They like dance. They are engaging and enjoy structure.”

Roles

“I’m a very engaged parent.”

“What school could we partner with?”

“I’m a very informed parent, so I know what’s out there. I truly believe the job of a parent—and not just to pick a school—but a parent is supposed to help map out your child’s life. You’re supposed to give them a better life even though what you’ve had. That’s the goal; I feel like my contributions to society are numerous, but I feel like there will be none greater than whatever it is I do with my child.”

“I think parenting is trial and error so a lot of—you know, had I put her in ninth grade and it was a total bust, then she’d be back in private school. When it’s time for school, this is what you should look for. Not because you think that that’s the best, but because it’s the best that works for your child.”

“As a parent I think you always question whether you’ve made the right decision; I think a more important decision is coming up—where is he going to go to college because now we’re paying for it. Now I really need you to be engaged. I really need you to get what you need to get.”

“I have kids who are smart kids. If there is something that they’re not getting at school, it’s not ideal, but it’s something I can help out with at home and my husband can help out with at home; you know you just take the opportunities as they come and do the best that you can with I guess the hand that you’re dealt.”

“My husband did a really good job investigating the school. My husband is getting a degree in education, plus he is arranged in schools so he had scoped out the schools and the school options and we were very interested in the Montessori model.”

“While I am a board member of a single-gender charter school, my wife makes most of the decisions regarding when our children attend school.”

“I am his father; I know him better than anyone.”

“My husband and I try to be informed. But we also depend on my sister who knows education quite well.”

“My husband and I are very engaged parents who use our friend to make decisions.”

Experiences

Parents' past experiences played a major role in the factors they considered when choosing a school for their children. One parent described her experience with her boundary school and her older child: "I did not have a good experience, I didn't feel it was an option for daughter number two." Another parent described her need to request a special transfer: "Being in the community and having lived in the community a long time and having had the opportunity to work with the staff and community of that school I just was not pleased with what he could gain academically or socially." One parent explained that their family's circumstances had changed, which made it necessary for them to transition from a private school to a public school. Five of the interviewed parents described the need to have a less traditional classroom setting for their young children. They recalled their experiences as teachers or family members observing the effects they felt that teaching style had on young children they had taught or children with whom they had frequent contact.

The *enrollment process* is the second component theme that emerged when parents described their experiences while engaging in the educational marketplace. Although parents mentioned the enrollment process in a warm-up question as they acclimated to the interview process, the component theme shed light on how parents gained access to the educational marketplace and how it was for some a deterrent to engaging in school choice. All but one of the parents described a variety of enrollment processes necessary to attend their school. Eighteen parents completed applications to enter the public school system's lottery for charter schools and specialty programs, and in some cases fulfilled other requirements if they were lottery winners. These were parents

of students entering school for the first time, transitioning from private to public education, transitioning to middle school, or transitioning to high school. Three parents described assessments that were part of their children's enrollment process. Once the student passed the assessment, he or she entered into the school program's lottery.

One student entering kindergarten "required an assessment that measured some academic skills, but mostly social interaction with peers." The school required two students entering kindergarten and elementary school, respectively, to complete a series of assessments that measured IQ and included observations of behavioral and social interaction with peers. A requirement for two students to receive continuity into their high school specialty program was identification as talented and gifted (TAG, by the public school system's assessment) in their elementary or middle school. Four students completed an assessment for entry into a high school specialty program. Two students did not meet the score requirement to gain entry and were therefore waitlisted. They later received access to another program that was not their first choice. Two parents completed the regular registration process for transitioning into their boundary school.

Table 6. Theme and Supporting Statements for Experience Leading to Choice

Theme	Supporting statements from parents
Experiences - Parental Role Construction	Past experiences with schools
	“ I have a 22-year-old who started off in the boundary school, and I did not have a good experience. I didn’t feel it was an option for daughter number two.”
	“I have a neighbor who has a daughter at the boundary school, and she’s in 12 th grade now. She’s been there since her ninth-grade year. Rarely do I hear her come back and talk about anything positive that happened.”
	“We had to transition from private school to public school due to family reasons.”
	“I ended up going to my neighborhood school as a kid; my experience was fine and I wanted my kid to have the same experience.”
	“We wanted something that was nontraditional, especially in his early years. We were looking for something that gave him the opportunity to kind of be a child while at the same time learn very important information.”
	“There are three elementary/middle schools in our area. All of them were failing schools and lacked diversity, which is what we wanted for our daughter and she is accustomed to.”
	“Both of my daughters attend the school. They were in public schools for Grades PreK-5. I wanted them to attend private school for middle and high school because I was not pleased with the middle and high schools in my area.”

Enrollment process

“I had to fill out an application for her to transition from middle school to the high school. She sat through the science and tech test. I did have to fill out some paperwork to express the desire to continue her TAG magnet program into the current high school.”

“It took 10 or 15 minutes. That met my expectations; there was a testing requirement, an application period, a timeslot in which you had to submit your documents. If the documents weren’t correct, you had to come back by a certain deadline, or you would lose your slot. That was very cumbersome.”

“Special transfer: his first year in public school, documentation showing proof of residency, and information as a special transfer”

“A school visit, a meeting with the head of that division, a test for my child, which was activities to build blocks”

“We switched from private school to public school so I had to take all of her school records, her transcripts from the old school; bring to the new school and fill out paperwork.”

“Tested in his eighth grade year. He had to be in algebra in his eighth-grade year, and he had to pass the test in order to get into that school; and then we had to fill out paperwork or what have you in order for him to go.”

“We don’t care to have our children vaccinated so that’s always a little interesting.”

“Enrollment process was fabulous, really streamlined. She was admitted through a lottery; once we had accepted the lottery, they contacted us to come in and fill out all of our registration paperwork at the school, which was a little different from other schools. It was all done in one day; I felt that this was very organized.”

“Lottery program; I didn’t know if that would have any kind of influence on the type of school or just who was going to be here.”

“It’s a lottery system, but it also offers a sibling provision, which allows my daughter to enroll after my son was accepted as a lottery student.”

“Enrollment process is slightly disjointed. Um...my...I didn’t have high expectations; I made it through the process.”

“We put an application in for, I believe, three schools. And one of the three ended up picking her. Actually, two of the three picked her. But the alternative would have been to go to the neighborhood school.”

“In the beginning in his PreK, he was in a private Montessori school, and then he was put on a wait list. He was waitlisted for his Montessori school; then they called us and told us that they pulled him off the waitlist. We just went and kind of just registered him. We went to school and went through pretty much the process in the main office. He had to get registered. He had to get a student ID number and pretty much just registered him for school.”

Decision Making

Finally, *decision making* was the strongest theme that surfaced to shed light upon the research question: How do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences? Three component themes emerged from the decision-making theme. Parents described how *comfortable* they were making school-choice decisions. Parents identified *successes and failures* as they engaged in the educational marketplace, what they had learned from the decisions they had made, how to remedy failures they had experienced, and how they pursued and ensured success. Some parents mentioned *including their children* in the decision-making process.

Most parents felt “very comfortable” with making decisions regarding their children’s education. As noted in the margin of many of the interview protocols, most parents appeared confused by the question. One parent almost appeared as if she were offended. Three parents engaging in school choice for the first time commented on feeling nervous or anxious when thinking about making these decisions for their child(ren). One parent of a kindergartner stated, “This one decision will affect her for the rest of her life, so I have to get this right the first time!” One parent said, “I think parenting is trial and error... had I put her in public school for 9th grade and it was a total bust, then she’d be back in private school.” Another participant explained, “I’m his parent; it’s my job to make these decisions for him because I know him and I know what’s best for him.”

When parents spoke of how their successes and failures had affected their decision making, most described how their children were doing in the schools or programs they had selected. Participant 01 commented, “I’m getting feedback from my

child that the programs or classes that she has aren't nearly as rigorous as she wants them to be. I'm beginning to question whether or not I should have considered something a lot more rigorous for her." Participant 04 stated, "I continue to feel it's the best we can do overall for her. I think we've done a good job in providing opportunities for our daughter." Participant 06 wished she had pursued private school options. Participant 07 stated, "I try not to think about it too much actually because if it wasn't the right choice, I can't go back and fix it at this point.... We did kind of what we had to do, like a lot of parents do what they have to do." Participant 11 described an extensive conversation she had with her daughter's kindergarten teacher: "I had a conversation with her teacher... she has such a long history of teaching Montessori and I realized her commitment to Montessori pedagogy and to her students, and that is when I knew I made the right decision."

Most parents did not directly include their child in their decision making. Students who were transitioning to middle or high school had more of a voice in their school choice than those entering elementary programs. Participant 01 stated, "I allowed very little input at the beginning because kids aren't really mature enough to know what's really better for them." Participant 02 noted, "I find myself being a lot more diplomatic than I feel like I have to be." Participant 05 included her daughter in many discussions about how she felt she would function in the school: "I felt confident in my choice and in discussion with her that we were doing the right thing."

Parents of elementary students explained that their decisions were based on the child's personality and ability to adapt to his or her environment. Participant 10 stated, "She just has a very strong personality; she could survive in a less regimented type

learning environment and she has very good social skills. The other two entered through the sibling application; they didn't really have a choice." Participant 12 noted,

Our children did not have a voice in the decision-making process. My wife and I made the decision based on their needs. Who knows that better than us? We kept in mind everything we knew about how they learn, their social interactions. They are really caring children, and we chose a school that would nurture everything we loved about them.

Participant 19 allowed her incoming kindergartner to choose her school after she had multiple "shadow days" at three different schools. Participant 20 remarked, "My oldest daughter enjoyed the school, so my husband and I decided to enroll our youngest daughter as well."

Table 7. *Theme and Supporting Statements for Decision Making*

Theme	Supporting statements from parents
Decision making – Parental Self-Efficacy – Rational Choice Theory	Comfort
	“On one hand I don’t have any discomfort about doing what’s right for my kid when it comes to education, but on the other hand I find myself being a lot more diplomatic than I feel like I have to be.”
	“First I was a little nervous; I made the right decision, because I’m accessible and because I’m very knowledgeable about certain things.”
	““Is it the best you can do?” Before anything else, you’re always a parent. Part of what helped me make this decision is recognizing I’m a parent before anything else.”
	“I felt confident in my choice.”
	“I am somewhat comfortable in my decision.”
	“Very comfortable, because I’m an educator myself.”
	“I feel very comfortable with it. Between my husband and myself, you know, we talk an awful lot about it. I think I’m a little more of the researcher; I feel very confident that I’ve made the right decision.”
	“Very comfortable. I mean I’m a researcher...my wife is, we don’t really do anything [hap]hazardly...everything has a purpose.”
	“For me, because of my experiences, I think it qualifies me to make the decision.”
	“I was comfortable with my decision because my child was happy. I did express a few concerns to the school administration regarding my child’s education.”
	“I am very comfortable with the school. My daughter is doing well. She still struggles with mathematics; however, she is doing well. I am pleased with her progress.”

“My daughters are doing well. They feel connected to the school and the community.”

Successes/Failures

“I’m getting feedback from my child that the programs or classes that she has aren’t nearly as rigorous as she wants them to be. I’m beginning to question whether or not I should have considered something a lot more rigorous for her.”

“I continue to feel—it’s the best we can do over all for her. I think we’ve done a good job in providing opportunities for our daughter.”

“Looking back on it, maybe I should have, you know, at least pursued it to see what it, kind of, had my perceptions of private school; I think we made the right decision.”

“I try not to think about too much actually because if it wasn’t the right choice, I can’t go back and fix it at this point; we did kind of what we had to do, like a lot of parents do what they have to do.”

“So that’s important because now this child gets...she’s saving on college cost right there, so as soon as she gets out she’s going to have her associate’s degree and be working on her bachelor’s. So it just makes sense.”

“I’ve become more confident about it. I don’t like to compare, but they are so far ahead of some of the kids that, you know, are not fortunate enough to be here that are in our, you know, personal circles.”

“I did not see failures. I only saw success because my daughter was happy and made strong academic gains.”

“The success is my daughter has transitioned well to public school. The failure is we did not do enough to ensure her mathematics instruction.”

“I do not feel all of the teachers are invested in the success of the children. However, my daughter has transitioned well to a new location.”

Including the child

“She later insisted that she go to the neighborhood school, and I told her, ‘No, that was not an option until you at least gave it a try.’ I’m glad I did because she’s fine now. I don’t make it seem like I would never have considered her opinion about it. I allowed very little input at the beginning because kids aren’t really mature enough to know what’s really better for them.”

“A lot more diplomatic than I should be for his sake”

“There was a lot of discussion with my daughter about how she felt she would function in the school. I felt confident in my choice and in discussions with her that we were doing the right thing.”

“I knew he wasn’t really interested in health sciences, but I’m thinking from sort of an economical standpoint, yeah. He was pretty adamant about that, so that’s the one we chose to go with.”

“She had recently expressed interests in more of the sciences.”

“My child did not have any say in the decision-making process. I wanted my child to be in a program with a strong curriculum that would support his needs.”

“My daughter did a shadow day at her new school. Her experience informed our decision for her new school.”

“My oldest daughter enjoyed the school. As a result, my husband and I decided to enroll our youngest daughter would attend the school as well.”

Summary of Results

The themes expectations, access, responsibility, experiences, and decision making emerged from the data in this qualitative study to answer the main research question and three subsequent questions. Additional component themes contributed to the understanding of the parents' experiences with choice. Participants were parents who were willing to share their experiences with school choice and how they made decisions for their child(ren)'s education. The data collected indicate that parents factor in many reasons and characteristics when making school-choice decisions for their children, reasons spread along continuums of academics, personal convenience, and personality and characteristics of the child.

Chapter 5: Interpretations, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children: specifically, what factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children, how do parents gather information about the schools available to their children, and how do parents choose the school that best fits their preferences?

A review of the literature revealed that a study by Valant (2014) concluded, “Most research on what families want from their children’s schools is based on parent surveys. Findings from surveys of school-choosing parents are consistent: parents report being primarily concerned about academic quality” (Valant, 2014, p. 3). With regard to parent school-choice decision making, Valant further questioned “whether school-choosing parents’ desires and interests shape how they respond to information?” This study served to address this gap in the literature regarding how parents make school-choice decisions.

One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children’s education is through choosing the school they attend. Parents enter the educational marketplace for different reasons (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Michel & Rothstein, 2002; Viadero, 2001). Some parents consider race, some consider special programs, and some consider geographical location as factors of school choice (Cooper, 2005; Elacqua et al., 2006; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Michel & Rothstein, 2002; Viadero, 2001). Promarket advocates further insist that the competitive nature of the market, which results from supply and demand forces, benefits

consumers by providing a range of quality schools from which to choose, including those that suit their children's needs (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1991; Vitteritti, 1999).

I used a criterion purposeful sampling technique to identify parents who met the criteria of the study. The emerging themes gathered from verbatim responses of participants as they introduced topics based on their experiences with choosing a school for their child(ren), told through their conceptual lens, provided the elements to develop a collective story of parents' decision making. The study results assist in understanding how parents make school-choice decisions.

Review of Results

Five themes emerged to reveal how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. The five themes that emerged were (a) *experiences*, (b) *expectations*, (c) *access*, (d) *responsibility*, and (e) *decision making*. The component parts of *experiences* included (a) school and (b) enrollment. The component parts associated with *expectations* included (a) academics/curriculum, (b) culture/safety, and (c) school. The component parts of *access* included (a) choice, (b) school program, and (c) sources of information. The component parts related to *responsibility* included (a) meeting needs, (b) knowing the child, and (c) roles. The component parts of *decision making* included (a) comfort, (b) successes/failures, and (c) including the child. The three-part framework of rational choice theory, parental role construction theory, and parental self-efficacy theory was identified through the review of the relevant literature on parental involvement in school choice. Each of the five emergent themes is discussed via the three-part theoretical framework.

The research participants provided rich, thick description as they articulated their experiences with school choice and the factors involved in their decision making. The interviews revealed multiple layers of experiences from each participant's interactions with school choice. Through in-depth interviews and discussions, it was clear that most parents strong feelings to support their decisions to engage in the educational marketplace.

Expectations emerged from the data as the strongest theme through which to understand and respond to the primary research question: How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children? The themes of *experiences*, *access*, *responsibility* and *decision making* answered the subsequent research questions regarding what factors parents consider when choosing a school, how they gather information about the schools available to their children, and how they choose the school that best fits their preferences.

The parent's experiences during the school choice process remained with them as they continued to navigate their child's education. Most of the participants in the study felt they had made the right decision regarding their child's education. A few are still "keeping their options open." Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the parents were completely engaged in their child's education and felt an overwhelming responsibility to make the right decision.

The literature on reasons parents choose to engage in the educational marketplace called for examining reasons through a qualitative methodology. In this study, participants described many reasons factoring into their school-choice decisions. Their primary reasons included attraction to the specialty program/curriculum, the quality of

education and the most rigorous learning opportunity, teacher tenure and qualifications, problems for children in previous or current school, and, most commonly, recommendations from within parents' social networks. Nevertheless, their overall choice decisions were based on complex assortments of influences.

According to some research, parents who choose are frustrated with regular public schools' educational quality and discipline (Martinez et al., 1994), and they tend to have higher expectations for their children's educational attainment than do non-choosing parents (Goldhaber, 1999; Martinez et al., 1994). Other concerns include whether parents choose schools for primarily academic quality reasons or primarily demographic and convenience reasons (Carnegie Foundation, 1992).

When asked to reflect on their level of satisfaction with their choices, parents cited their reasons for choice and the degree to which those reasons were addressed related to their satisfaction with their decisions. In a study on factors influencing parents' decisions to transfer to a charter school, Lange and Lehr (2000) found small class size, staff members, academic programming, and special education services were most important, with 80% of the parents choosing new schools due to dissatisfaction with their children's former school. In another study on factors influencing charter school decisions, Kleitz et al. (2000) noted that parents chose for better educational quality, smaller class sizes, and safety. Both studies indicated that ease of transportation was an important consideration for parents, especially for those least likely to have resources to support daily transportation to a distant school (Kleitz et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000).

The most distinct and apparent mode of gathering information about their school-choice options was the social network or "word of mouth." The undercurrent throughout

all of the interviews pointed to the impact of social discussions among parents and friends regarding schools of choice. Social networks emerged as a primary resource for learning about choice options and school reputation. As indicated in the literature (Chung-Kai & Chia-Hung, 2009; Maddaus, 1990) and supported by the interview participants, the primary method of finding out about schools of choice, regardless of the type of choice option, is through parents' social networks (Berends & Zottola, 2009). Their social circles tend to influence the schools about which they learn.

The research found that parents who volunteered as participants for this study were more similar than different, supported by the parent demographic data collected for the study. All but two parents held Master's and professional degrees and only one was unemployed. There was not one participant in the study who was not aware of their choice options or how they would access information to learn more about their choice options. Perceptions of a lack of diversity among families at schools of choice also support the social network theory of how information about schools of choice is passed on, thereby raising further concerns about equity and access to choice.

Parents in this study acknowledged a sincere responsibility for providing the best education for their children. Some parents noted the loss of what regular neighborhood public schools had to offer in terms of community, diversity, and connection, whereas others lamented on the unfairness of choice, in that their children were able to access through the luck of a lottery that parents who were less connected or less informed did not have access to. Parents were deliberate about entering the educational market place searching for what they perceived to be a superior education provided by schools of choice. It appeared that what parents were actually seeking was the exclusivity attained

by schools of choice. Two parents believed that regular public schools already were adequate, and they did not feel any moral dilemma. Although parents acknowledged the necessity of exit options provided by choice, because they did not want to see children stuck in subpar schools, they also expressed concern that choice was not an option for some children, by virtue of their circumstances, thereby limiting their access to a variety of resources.

In looking back on the outcomes of their choice decisions, 18 parents perceived their school of choice to be a superior education opportunity for their children due to the curriculum and pedagogy and the school's culture and nurturing environment. Parents perceived that many aspects of their school's curriculum, community, and structures would be relevant and successful in all of the public schools and expressed a hope that, in the future, all students would have access to similar programs and curriculum.

The theoretical foundation for this study emanated from the literature on how parents make school-choice decisions, including research on parental role construction—how parents decide to become involved in their children's education and participate in the educational market place; parental self-efficacy—how equipped parents feel to make decisions on school choice; and, rational choice theory—how parents make the best decisions considering their options together has described how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. Within the context of school choice and parent decision making, views of parental role construction and parental self-efficacy through the lens of rational choice theory and the experiential knowledge of the researcher and the study participants, I present the essence of school-choice decision making through the descriptive responses of those who have lived the experience.

Conclusions and Interpretations

Participants in the study, through interview responses, shared rich, thick description of their experiences with school choice. These thoughts, recollections and emotions left from lived experiences assisted in digging deep into the core of the collective experience of these parents.

School choice has been a tool used by politicians to bring about educational reform by providing the opportunity for parents to move their children to higher performing schools, encouraging competition between schools for student enrollment, and improving educational outcomes. The primary research question directed this study: How do parents from a Mid-Atlantic urban-suburban school district make school-choice decisions for their children? Parents' experiences with the educational marketplace provided great insight into how parents make decisions regarding schools. Analyzing the experiences of the parents revealed that parents want rigorous programs that prepare their children for college and they place a great deal of importance on the information passed on and shared through their social networks in making a school choice.

School choice has given parents more educational options for their children. School choice, where available, has increased the competitive balance of schools across many communities and school districts. Parents perceived that their engagement in the educational marketplace to make school-choice decisions served to ensure that their child(ren)'s academic, social, and emotional needs were being met.

When it's all said and done, school choice comes down to one individual variable, the parent's ability to choose a school where they feel their child will thrive. To most parents, *thrive* does not have a single definition. Thrive involves the social, academic,

and physical potential of the child. Wealthy parents have the financial means to choose a school because of the private school options available. Parents of less financial means, however, do not have the opportunity to control what they believe is best for their child's education. It is for this reason that school choice research is important. Stakeholders need to be aware of the reasons and expectations parents have for engaging in school choice.

Parents construct their roles as decision makers in the educational market place because they understand it is their responsibility and they take that responsibility seriously. Parents' experiences and social networks shape their perceptions of schools and as a result define their role. Parents feel equipped to make decisions on school choice because they know what their children's needs are and are clear as to how those needs will be met educationally. Parents' are confident about making school-choice decisions not only because of their social networks but also because they include their child in the decision-making process. Parents make the best decisions considering their options and their access to information and resources.

As evident in the research literature, educators have perceived that there are many potential barriers for all families in learning about, perceiving as viable options, and accessing and enrolling in schools of choice. Potential barriers included physical or logistical (transportation, daycare, schedules), financial (supporting school financially, relative freedom from financial stress), and life situation (work, family expectations, education to support school's pedagogy). In the literature, the primary barriers to access to choice included transportation (Kleitz et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000) and knowledge about choice options (Berends & Zottola, 2009). The depth and complexity

of reasons and decision-making processes provided by these parents in this study can inform the literature.

Implications for Practice

The collective stories of parents in this research study who make school-choice decisions for their children have implications for all of the stakeholders mentioned earlier regarding school choice practices. Educational stakeholders must examine critically the relationship between parent engagement in school choice and the decision-making process. Stakeholders who are aware of how and why parents make school-choice decisions can have informed discussions about district school-choice policies, options and the needs of the community.

As identified in the research, parents are greatly influenced by their social networks. Schools and school systems must be prepared to dispel misconceptions built up by social networks and counter with positive marketing about what the school/school system has to offer. School districts must provide parents with accurate and realistic information that effectively explains how they plan to compete with outside entities and provide educational services for all students in the district.

Limitations

I successfully completed this study with significant data gathered and analyzed on how parents make school-choice decisions. There are several limitations to the study, however, that must be noted. Given the methodological design, the sample consisted of parents selected through the filter of a racially diverse, United Methodist church congregation and attached preschool/kindergarten program. These parents responded to the request for participation because they wanted to be engaged in their child's education

by being active members of the school choice process. It is important to note that those parents who did not enter school lotteries or apply to private school programs, but chose to remain at their assigned boundary school, are also active choosers who considered their options but made the best decision for their child and family.

All of the parent participants were concerned with more than their child's academic success, but more with other less quantifiable indicators such as school culture, safety, and rigorous curriculum. All of the parents of the study had expectations of their child attending college. This cannot be considered the norm for all parents in the school district sampled because there may be parents who exercise their right to school-choice options but are not concerned with their child attending higher education.

Another limitation is that I am directly involved in the school-choice process. I am a high school assistant principal at a school of choice. I have the opportunity to promote the success of the school programs and activities. This limitation is inherent in narrative inquiry.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are applicable to the church/school community that was interviewed and cannot be generalized to any other population.

The basic question even for qualitative research is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. But since small, nonrandom random samples are selected purposefully in qualitative research, it is not possible to generalize statistically. A small sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many. (Merriam, 2002, p. 28)

Based on the site selection, population sample, and demographics of the parent participants, this study is not transferable outside the context of this study.

Recommendations for Future Study

Although the results of this study suggest many areas for further research, I offer five specific suggestions within the areas of replication, new research, and pilot studies for implementing the recommendations that emerged from the findings. More detailed research in the five suggested areas should focus on demographics not addressed in this research, that is, English language learners, parents without significant connections to prominent social networks, and parents who have not been graduated from college.

1. The results of this study suggest the need for replication in different demographic contexts, including a more socioeconomically disadvantaged population, less educated research participants, and a younger population of parents. Seeking parents who have diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, as well as various levels of involvement in their child's education, is strongly suggested.
2. Although the parents who participated in this study were knowledgeable about the opportunities available to their children, it is possible that parents who were not represented in the participant demographics are not aware of the same opportunities. Identifying parents' perceptions and knowledge of school choices available to their children would benefit tremendously the body of research.
3. Researchers seeking to replicate this study should seek families who were not successful in accessing choice, that is, they were unaware of options outside their assigned boundary schools. Researchers also should seek families who have found success in accessing choice but did not experience success in

meeting the needs of their children.

4. With the competition associated with school choice, a new area for research could include what school districts are doing to help attract students and parents to enroll in their school or school system and what is being done to retain those who are currently enrolled.
5. Researchers should explore the roles principals and building level administrators play in the school-choice process of enrollment and program selection.

Parents' demand for certain types of schooling characteristics influences what schools supply (Cooper, 2005). Schools compete to attract parent consumers because they need the parents to choose them to remain open and viable (Cooper, 2005).

Promarket advocates further insist that the competitive nature of the market, which results from supply and demand forces, benefits consumers by providing a range of quality schools from which to choose, including those that suit their children's needs (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 1991; Vitteritti, 1999).

Every parent who exercises school choice makes decisions about their role in their child's life. Parents who exercise school choice believe that their involvement is important, effective, and will be positively associated with their child's performance in school. Parents who exercise school choice have expectations around the benefit of choice and make decisions based on their desired benefits.

To be a successful leader in the educational marketplace, it will be important for all stakeholders to work together to determine the needs of parents and students in their community and develop programs within the school that best suit those needs. Providing

effective information to parents regarding curriculum, instruction, staffing, cocurricular programs, and student growth activities is an important way to keep parents engaged in the educational process.

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Appendix A – Researcher Identity Memo

As a master educator, a district level administrator, and an assistant principal, I have had the opportunity to reside on multiple charter school review panels and participate on charter school site visit teams, as well as design proposals for new specialty programs and expand existing specialty programs in my district. When reviewing applications for charter schools, I have made decisions on whether or not to approve curriculum based on what and how I believe students should learn. When designing proposals for specialty programs, I have made decisions regarding the locations of these programs, which grade bands will be targeted, and how students will be enrolled. When visiting charter schools, I made decisions on the schools' viability and success based on the curriculum taught, assessments given, and teacher observations. I believed that all of these decisions were made based upon my professional opinion as an educator-administrator and my decisions were in the best interest of the students in the district that I served.

As a parent, I began to make decisions regarding my son's education when he was born. My husband and I consciously chose not to put our son in daycare and opted for home care with my father for financial reasons. Over the years, I noticed a more intellectually engaged child than those that I observed at daycare facilities. We chose The Little Gym for his social development. When he was two, we had the first opportunity to enroll him in private preschool; we jumped to it. As an educator, I was convinced that Head Start-PreK was the best opportunity to set my son on the right path to academic success. When our son turned three, we faced a really tough decision. Should we keep our son in the costly, private PreK program that he was currently

attending, or should we move him to a free, public, Montessori, PreK program run by our school district? We decided to enter the lottery and wait to see what the result would be. After all, he could always stay in his private PreK program.

When it was time to enter our son into the specialty program lottery, I was forced to consider many of the same things I considered as an educator-administrator; only this time, there was something very different about making this decision. I had to consider what I wanted for my child moving forward. My husband and I considered the following when making our final decision:

1. Should we consider the free public education over the costly private education?
2. Was there a sibling option for our daughter to attend the same school when she was eligible?
3. Did this school offer middle school Grades 6-8 as well? (The neighborhood middle school in its current state was not an option for our children)
4. How far was the school from both our home and my parents' home? (My husband and I would drop the kids off and my parents would pick them up.)
5. How well were current students performing in reading, math, and science?

In the end, we were very thankful that we “won the lottery.” We rested comfortably in knowing that our son and daughter would be together at the same school for the next 8-10 years. Initially, we weren't sure, nor were we concerned, that the Montessori model would be a good fit for our children. We have been very pleased that they both have adjusted very well to the program.

As a parent, I assume that all parents make choices. I assume that all parents consider the same factors that I did when making school choices. I assume that parents weigh all their options before making final decisions regarding their children's education. I assume that all of the factors that parents consider weigh equally when making school-choice decisions. I assume that parents make "trade-offs" whether they are financial, geographical, social, or other when considering school-choice options for their children.

Because of my experiences with school choice as both an educator-administrator and a parent, I would like to better understand how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. I have realized that although my experiences in both roles are very different, they may not have acted independently of one another. When making decisions regarding school choice as an employee of the district, was I inherently acting as a parent? Was I making decisions based upon what I wanted for my children or was I making decisions in terms of what was best for all children?

To do my job most effectively and to better serve the families and students in my district, I believe that it would be in my best interest to understand how parents make these decisions. If my assumptions are incorrect and not all parents make school choices, I would like to understand why. If not all parents consider the same factors that I did, which factors do they consider and why are they different from mine? If parents make "trade-offs" in their school-choice decisions, what are they and do they hold equal weight with other factors?

The idea for this dissertation evolved after having conversations with parents about the school-choice process in my district. Many parents were aware of the programs available to their children whereas more were completely oblivious. Some parents had

inquired within their community about how other parents felt about the programs their children attended. Some parents had reached out to the schools to get more information about their programs. Understanding how parents make school-choice decisions is beneficial to educators–administrators in making decisions regarding how school-choice information is disseminated, as well as what and where school-choice options are available to families. I hope that educators–administrators find value in the decisions parents make with regard to their children’s education. I believe that when parents feel that their voices are heard, our district can begin to retain students and not lose them to private and homeschools, and we can begin to strengthen our school system.

I find unspeakable joy in parenting and educating my children. I am also blessed with the opportunity to educate the children of others. I do not believe that I or anyone else should make decisions about my child’s education without my input. School choice should be available to all families who desire a specific education for their children. As I learn more about parents’ decision making with regard to school choice, I find that this study is most relevant to me as an educator–administrator.

Appendix B – Parent Recruitment Flyer

How Do Parents Engage in School Choice Decisions?

This research study is for parents/primary caregivers of school-aged children.



Mrs. Daria N. Valentine, Doctoral Candidate at The George Washington University's Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD) wants to examine how parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban-suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children.

RESEARCH IS ALWAYS VOLUNTARY!

Would the study be a good fit for me?

This study might be a good fit for you if:

- You are the parent/primary caregiver of school-aged children, responsible for making decisions regarding the students' school-choice options.
- You have in the past and/or are presently considering entering the educational marketplace.
- You are willing to voluntarily share your experiences related to school-choice decision making.



What would happen if I took part in the study?

If you decide to take part in this research study, you would:

- Complete a maximum of two face to face interviews

Families who take part in this study will get a Thank You Letter to thank them for their time and participation.



**To take part in the research study
“How Do Parents Engage in School Choice Decisions”
or for more information, please contact Daria N. Valentine
at 301-758-2054 or dariavalentine08@gmail.com**

The principal researcher for this study is
Mrs. Daria N. Valentine, Doctoral Candidate at
The George Washington University, GSEHD

Appendix C – Letter to Parents

October 2015

Dear Parent(s):

I am currently completing a doctoral dissertation at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. I am interested in understanding parents' decision making regarding school choice as few studies have been conducted from a parent's perspective. Most current studies include factors that influence parents' school-choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process, but few studies allow the voices of parents to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children.

Your participation in this study will contribute significantly in filling this gap in the literature and will be greatly appreciated. The results of this study will benefit all those currently interested in educational trends in research regarding school choice, such as school administrators, teachers, and parents. This dissertation is under the direction of Dr. Linda Lemasters, Associate Professor of Educational Administration at The George Washington University.

This study will involve parent interviews as the primary method of data collection. Parent interviews will take approximately one hour. All interviews will be digitally recorded; however, the parent participants in this study will be assigned pseudonyms and will remain anonymous. Participation in this study is voluntary.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 301.758.2054. My email address is dariavalentine08@gmail.com

Best regards,

Daria N. Valentine
Doctoral Degree Candidate
The George Washington University

Appendix D – Thank You to Participating Parents

October 2015

Dear Parent(s):

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my dissertation research study. The purpose of my research study is to examine how parents make school-choice decisions for their children. I am interested in understanding parents' decision making regarding school choice as few studies have been conducted from a parent's perspective. Most current studies include factors that influence parents' school-choice decisions and the barriers to parent engagement in the school-choice process, but few studies allow the voices of parents to be heard about how they make school-choice decisions for their children.

Your willingness to participate in this study will allow those interested in current trends in educational research regarding parental involvement an opportunity to hear what parents contribute to education through their involvement in their children's education.

Again, thank you for your participation; I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 301.758.2054. My email address is dariavalentine08@gmail.com

Best regards,

Daria N. Valentine
Doctoral Degree Candidate
The George Washington University

Appendix E – Prepared Pre-Interview Statement

Pre-Interview

My name is Daria Valentine, and I am a doctoral degree student at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. I would like to thank you for taking the time to meet with me to answer a series of questions to assist me in my research. My research interest is in parent decision making regarding school choice. I am specifically interested in the experiences of parents.

I would like to tape this interview and take notes for my own research purposes and will keep reflections confidential. I ask that you agree to a follow-up phone call if I need to clarify any aspects of our interview today. You will be given a pseudonym to protect your privacy; thus, your identity will remain anonymous. This recording will be erased once I make a transcript and complete the requirements for my doctoral degree program. This research will be conducted under the strictest rules of research ethics as defined by The George Washington University. Your participation in this study is voluntary and optional. The results will benefit all who are currently involved in current trends in education regarding parental involvement, such as school administrators, teachers, and parents. There are no risks involved in participating in this study.

Would you like to proceed?

If yes – At this time I will give you an informed consent form. Please take a few moments to read it over and ask any questions that you may have.

(If participant denies the right to record, researcher will reiterate confidentiality of the study; if participant still is reluctant to be recorded, the researcher will proceed with taking copious notes.)

Appendix F – Interview Protocol

1. Warm-up: Is your child currently enrolled in school? If so, how long has your child been in his or her current school? Describe the enrollment process and/or expectations for the school.
2. What type of school does your child(ren) attend? Probe: How did you choose this school?
3. What schools were available to you?
4. What are the most important things you want in a school?
5. What factors did you consider when choosing your child's school? Probe: Were these factors given equal weight?
6. What sources were used to gather information about the schools available to your child? Probe: How accessible was the information about the school? Probe: To what extent do you feel your sources were reliable?
7. How did you make a decision about the school that best fit your preferences?
8. What characteristics about your child influenced your decision making?
9. To what extent do you feel comfortable making decisions about your child's school? Probe: To what extent do you feel you have made the right decision?
10. What types of schools would you suggest for your school district?
11. Wrap-up: Is there anything that you would like to add?

Appendix G – Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this dissertation research study is to explore parents' decision making regarding school choice. The researcher is interested in the parents' experiences in engaging in the school-choice process.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Complete a Parent Demographic Data Sheet.
2. Participate in a recorded interview session with the researcher for approximately one hour.
3. Allow the researcher to follow up with you via telephone if it is necessary to clarify any information from the initial interview.

Additional information:

1. Each parent in this study will be assigned a pseudonym and will remain anonymous.
2. Recordings of the interviews will be erased once they have been transcribed and the researcher has completed the requirements for the doctoral degree.
3. Participation in this study is voluntary. In addition, you are free to withdraw at any time.
4. The risks in this study are minimal. All results will be published without names or identifying characteristics.
5. The results of this study will benefit all who are currently involved in current trends in education regarding parental involvement, including school administrators, teachers, and parents.

Thank you for your willingness to contribute to this research.

Contact Information: The researcher listed below may be reached to answer questions about the research subjects' rights or related matters.

Daria N. Valentine, The George Washington University
Dariavalentine08@gmail.com
301.758.2054

You may also contact:

Dr. Linda Lemasters, Associate Professor of Educational Administration at The George Washington University at lindal@gwu.edu or at 804.693.9189

Or

The Office of Human Research, ohrirb@gwu.edu or [202-994-2715](tel:202-994-2715))

Appendix H – Parent Demographic Data Sheet

The following information is designed to give the researcher background information that will assist with the interpretation of the research data. Your responses are voluntary and will remain completely confidential. Please answer all of the questions to the best of your ability. Thank you for your participation in this research study.

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: M _____ F _____
3. Race: _____
4. Education Level: _____
(Grade school, High School, Technical/Trade, 2yr/4yr Degree, Master's, Doctorate)
5. Employed: Y _____ N _____
6. Marital Status: _____ Single _____ Live with partner _____ Married
_____ Divorced _____ Remarried _____ Widowed
7. Number of children: _____
8. Grade Band: Child 1 _____
(PreK, Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8), High (9-12))
Child 2 _____
(PreK, Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8), High (9-12))
Child 3 _____
(PreK, Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8), High (9-12))
Child 4 _____
(PreK, Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8), High (9-12))
Child 5 _____
(PreK, Elementary (K-5), Middle (6-8), High (9-12))

Please do not write below this line.

P# _____

Appendix I - Research Question Alignment to Theoretical Framework and Interview Questions

Research questions	Theoretical framework	Interview questions
How do parents from a diverse Mid-Atlantic urban–suburban county make school-choice decisions for their children?	Rational choice theory	
What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children?	Parental role construction theory and rational choice theory	<p>What type of school does your child currently attend?</p> <p>Did you choose this school among others, or were you assigned to this school?</p> <p>What schools were available to you?</p> <p>What are the most important things you want in a school?</p> <p>What factors did you consider when choosing your child’s school?</p> <p>Were these factors given equal weight?</p>
How do parents gather information about the schools available to their children?	Parental self-efficacy	<p>How did you gather information about the schools available to your child?</p> <p>What sources were used to gather information?</p>

		<p>How accessible was the information about the school?</p> <p>To what extent did you feel your resources were reliable?</p>
<p>How do parents choose the school that best fits their children?</p>	<p>Rational choice theory, parental self-efficacy, and parental role construction theory</p> <p>Rational choice theory</p> <p>Rational choice theory and parental self-efficacy</p> <p>Parental role construction theory and parental self-efficacy</p>	<p>How did you make a decision about the school that best fit your preferences?</p> <p>What characteristics about your child aid in your decision making?</p> <p>To what extent do you feel comfortable making decisions about your child's school?</p> <p>To what extent do you feel you made the right decision?</p> <p>Are you satisfied with the variety of school choices available to you?</p> <p>What types of schools or programs would you suggest for your school district?</p>