"It's Our Best Choice Right Now": Exploring How Charter School Parents Choose

Adriana Villavicencio
New York University
U.S.A.

Abstract: One of the underlying premises of the charter school movement is that quality drives consumer choice. As educational consumers, parents are viewed as rational actors who, if given the choice, will select better performing school. In examining the choice processes of charter school parents, however, this study calls into question the extent to which some parents can make optimal choices. Interviews with parents enrolled in two different charter schools indicate that charter parents do not necessarily choose higher performing charter schools; nor do they necessarily leave low performing charter schools. The study also provides evidence that parent "choice sets" (Bell, 2009) vary depending on networks and social capital. Thus, choice alone does not necessarily ensure that parents will have better, more equal options.
Keywords: charter schools; parent choice; choice policies

"Ahora se nuestra mejor opción": Examinando como los padres de escuelas Charter hacen sus selecciones
Resumen: Una de las premisas fundamentales del movimiento de escuelas charter es que la calidad impulsa la elección del consumidor. Como consumidores de educación, los los padres son vistos como actores racionales que, si se les da la opción, seleccionará la escuela

mejor rendimiento. En el examen de los procesos de elección de los padres de las escuelas charter, sin embargo, este estudio pone en tela de juicio la medida en que algunos padres pueden tomar decisiones. Las entrevistas con padres de estudiantes matriculados en dos escuelas autónomas diferentes indican que los padres fundadores no necesariamente eligen las escuelas charter por tener rendimiento más alto, y tampoco necesariamente abandonan escuelas charter de bajo rendimiento. El estudio también muestra que los "conjuntos de elección" (Bell, 2009) de los padres varían en función de las redes y de capital social. Por lo tanto, la noción de elección por sí sola no es necesariamente una garantía de que los padres tendrán mejores opciones, ni mayor igualdad.
Palabras clave: escuelas charter; elección de los padres, las políticas de elección

"Agora é a nossa melhor opção": Examinando como os pais de escolas charter fazem suas seleções
Resumo: Uma das premissas fundamentais do movimento escola charter é que os pais são vistos como atores racionais selecionariam a escola de melhor desempenho, Ao examinar os processos de escolha dos pais de escolas charter, no entanto, este estudo coloca em questão o pressuposto da medida em que alguns pais possam tomar decisões. Entrevistas com os pais de alunos matriculados em duas escolas em diferentes regiões indicam que os pais fundadores não necessariamente escolhem as escolas charter por ter maior desempenho, e não necessariamente deixar as escolas charter de baixo desempenho. O estudo também mostra que os "conjuntos de escolha" (Bell, 2009) de pais variar conforme as redes de capital social. Portanto, a própria noção de escolha não é necessariamente uma garantia de que os pais terão melhores opções, e uma maior igualdade.
Palavras-chave: escolas charter, a escolha dos pais, as políticas de escolha

Introduction

One of the assumptions underpinning the charter school movement is that consumer choice is driven by school quality. As educational consumers, parents are viewed as rational actors who, if given the choice, will select better performing schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 1999; Viteritti, 2002). Some argue that in an educational marketplace, parents will not select low-quality schools and dissatisfied parents will withdraw their children from schools that are not meeting their needs (Chubb & Moe, 1990). But, research has shown that both selecting a school and keeping ones children enrolled is based on a variety of different factors outside of school quality, including parent characteristics and access to certain social networks (Ball, 2003, 2009; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Interviews with and survey responses from parents engaged in the choice process, for example, show that differences in socioeconomic status, social capital, and education levels can influence how parents choose (André-Bechely, 2005; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bancroft, 2009; Bell, 2009; Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Wells, 1996). These studies call into question the extent to which some parents are able to make optimal choices about schools.[1]

This study specifically takes up these issues by exploring the choice processes of a number of charter school parents in a large urban school district. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1) What search processes and strategies do parents use when selecting charter schools?
2) By what criteria are parents choosing individual charter schools?

[1] The term "parents" in this paper signifies not only biological parents, but guardians and other family members who serve as parental figures and who make decisions about a child's schooling.

3) By what criteria are charter school parents choosing to remain or leave in individual charter schools?

Interviews with parents of children enrolled in two different charter schools show a wide variety of search processes ranging from very little effort to efforts that were much more comprehensive. Second, these parents did not necessarily choose charter schools because they were academically high performing; nor did they necessarily leave low performing charter schools or schools they found dissatisfying for other reasons. The parents interviewed also described how their "choice sets" (Bell, 2009) – or their perception of their choice sets and those of other parents – varied depending on networks, social capital,[2] and other resources. They identified race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status as being other mediating factors in an individual's choice set. Overall, this research expands the existing literature on school choice by painting a picture of how parents make decisions about charter schools for their children and presents evidence that choice alone does not necessarily ensure that parents will have better, more equal options.

Competition and Choice in Education: A Limited Perspective

The theoretical arguments underlying many school-choice policies derive largely from the assumption that market-based reform will improve schools, especially for students whose access to quality education is limited. Some claim that a free market system, by creating competition, will increase the quality of schools by weeding out unsuccessful schools the way unsuccessful businesses are weeded out in a competitive environment (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1962; Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 1999; Viteritti, 2002). Though there is evidence that there are pockets of successful charter schools (Hoxby, Moraka, & Kang, 2009; Florida Department of Education, 2012; Tuttle, Gill, & Knecthel, 2013), national research indicates that many charter schools are underperforming or performing at similar levels to public schools (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Thus, while many individual charter schools are succeeding (and by the same measure so too are many traditional public schools), on the whole charter schools are not necessarily of higher quality.

The other underlying assumption behind choice-based reform is that when given a choice, consumers (i.e., parents) will select better performing schools. Rational choice theory explains decision making in terms of a cost-benefit analysis of a set of alternatives in which actors select the option that has the highest benefits with the lowest costs (Scott, 2001). But the theory of rational choice suggests only that parents will choose schools based on how they perceive and measure benefits and costs; factors of consideration may include student achievement or school performance, but also safety, convenience, or geographical proximity (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). Moreover, some parents may have access to more information about which schools to choose. Asymmetric access to information may mean that a rational choice for one parent may not necessarily result in selecting a high performing school or leaving a failing one. Asymmetries between low-income, less educated parents and their wealthier, more educated counterparts are thus more likely to exacerbate inequalities rather than reduce them (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). In many districts, choice policies have also increased racial and socioeconomic stratification, thereby perpetuating the societal inequities that choice policies are intended to mitigate (Eckes & Trotter, 2007; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2010; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Mead & Green, 2012; Orfield, 2009).

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[2] Social capital is defined as *resources embedded in one's social networks, resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks* (Lin, 2001, Chapter 2).

An application of market principles – that competition will yield better schools and that parents will choose them – to education does not take into account the messiness of how choice processes are enacted nor the unintended consequences of choice policies on where students actually enroll. This study examines these phenomena by providing examples of how a number of charter school parents think about their own decision making, the factors that influenced their decision to select their charter schools, and the way they perceive their options and the options of other parents and families.

Bounded Rationality and Choice Sets: Examining Parent Choice

When viewed as consumers, parents are predicted to choose the "best" schools that serve their children the most effectively. However – as in many marketplaces – different groups of parents do not have access to the same sets of information, networks, or resources. Consequently, certain parents will come to know about schools that other parents may remain unaware of. In addition, parents choose based on their knowledge of schools, but also on what they value. Even if different groups of parents have the same information, certain parents may choose one school over another because of preferences and values associated with social or cultural beliefs (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). Thus, the schools that parents choose may reflect both what they have access to and the qualities they value most.

In exploring the choice making processes of parents, Bell (2009) applies Herbert Simon's work (1986) on "bounded rationality." She summarizes that when making decisions, people do not consider all possible options. Rather, they exhibit "bounded rationality" - deciding among a fewer set of possibilities (p. 192). Simon's theory also indicates that people do not often make the "best" choices; they choose reasonable options that meet expectations and then stop looking. Bell (2009) applies this process to parent selection of schools, explaining that "parents will select reasonable schools given their expectations of what is reasonable" (p. 192). She argues that parents do not choose among every school accessible by transportation, but rather that they choose among much smaller "choice sets" (Lurie, 2004) determined in part by a parent's social and economic capital (Bell, 2009). The decision making process of parents choosing among schools (including charter schools) is thus influenced not only by what options are readily available, but also by individual "choice sets" (or the perceptions thereof). These "choice sets" are shaped by family characteristics and not necessarily by the characteristics of the schools themselves. The "choice sets" of different groups of parents will be a lens through which to examine the parent choices in this study and may help explain certain demographic changes at these study sites over time.

Methods

This study is situated in the context of a larger comparative case study of four charter schools in New York City. School section criteria included student demographics, years in existence, and location. There were no exclusion criteria for parent participants. Data collection included interviews, document analysis, and observations. Data analysis was an iterative process of coding for themes and patterns first between two similar cases and then across all four schools.

Site Selection

The comparative case study from which this study is based compared two racially homogenous charter schools to two more racially balanced charter schools in New York City (see Table 1). "Homogenous" schools were defined as enrolling a student population that was 95-100% Black and Latino, while "diverse" or more "racially balanced" schools were defined as enrolling a

student population that was 75% or less Black and Latino student population (Orfield, 2009). The purpose of the larger study was to understand the different factors that influenced student composition in charter schools. Because so few charter schools in NYC are diverse (about 10% compared to the city average of 30%), I was interested in learning what processes were at play in helping to create and maintain diversity in certain charter schools.

I first identified the schools that were "diverse" (about 10% percent of the city's charter schools), and then excluded those that were in existence for less than three years because new schools often face unique challenges and are still actively trying to build their student enrollment. I further narrowed the sample by recruiting the schools that were located in neighborhoods with three or more charter schools, so I could learn from parents who had more charter school options. Since I was attempting to collect data in two of these diverse schools, I stopped recruitment efforts after obtaining participation from two schools. I then proceeded to recruit two schools that were *not* diverse as points of comparison. One of the schools I had conducted a pilot study in prior to this study fit the criteria above and agreed to participate. To select the last school, I used my professional networks to reach out to a set of homogenous schools that fit the criteria above. Once a school agreed to participate, I did not continue recruitment efforts among the homogenous schools.

Table 1
Student Demographics at School Sites[3]

	Collegiate Charter	Success Academy	Brooklyn Hope	Harlem Prep	NYC charter schools
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	0%	2%	0%	NA
Black or African American	52%	48%	47%	71%	60%
Hispanic or Latino	47%	27%	6%	28%	33%
Asian or Native Hawaiian	0%	17%	1%	1%	2%
White	0%	2%	27%	0%	3%
Multiracial	0%	6%	17%	0%	NA
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	79%	41%	44%	68%	77%
Limited English Proficient	6%	3%	1%	4%	6%

Source: New York State School Report Card: Accountability and Overview Report, 2007-2008.

To summarize, all four schools had been in existence for at least three years and were located in neighborhoods with several other charter schools. Though not a part of the selection criteria, all four schools were also relatively high performing as measured by the city's school progress report for every school in the district. (These school "report cards" are based on student performance on tests, student growth, and a learning environment survey taken by teachers, parents, and students.)

For this paper, I chose to focus on parent data from two of the charter schools (shaded above) in the larger study rather than all four because I was able to conduct interviews with many more parents in these schools. This was less a function of parent characteristics and more an artifact of having access to school parents during non-school hours. Two of the schools were particularly

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[3] Pseudonyms have been used for all schools.

open to having me present my research to their parents and recruit at parent meetings, a format that yielded higher response rates among parents. Neither the four schools in the larger study nor the two schools discussed in this paper are intended to be representative of the entire charter school cohort in NYC. However, they are not atypical in many of their characteristics and so may provide some insight into how parents at other charter schools make decisions about both selecting their schools and choosing to keep their children enrolled in them.

Data Collection

Data collection at these sites occurred during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years. The primary sources of data for the larger study were semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and charter school parents. For this paper, I focus almost exclusively on interview data from parents. At Collegiate Charter and Success Academy, I interviewed 13 and 12 parents respectively. I recruited most of the parents by attending parent association meetings, describing my research to parents, and distributing a sign-in sheet for interested parents. I also posted flyers in the main office and announcement boards that included my contact information. Because interviewees were voluntary participants, they are not necessarily a representative sample of parents, nor do they include non-choosing or non-charter parents. At Collegiate Charter, all of the interviewees were Black and Latino, which is representative of the student composition. At Success Academy, interviewee participants were Black, Latino, White, and Asian, also representative of the more diverse student body at this school. Across both schools, parents represented a range of length of time in their schools from one year to more than five years.

Interview questions covered six broad topic areas: 1) background information on family and students, 2) criteria for and process of selecting the school, 3) comparison of this school to other schools, 4) perceptions of their school (and that of their children), 5) their school's student composition, and 6) their decision making criteria and process for remaining in their school. These questions attempted to capture not only how parents selected their schools, but also which range of options or (choice sets) they selected from. Because the sample size was limited, there was no systematic connection drawn between those choice sets and the parents' racial/ethnic background or socioeconomic status (which I did not inquire about). Rather, the interview data captures the parents' impressions of their own choice sets and their access to other schools.

In addition to interviews, I made several informal observations to help provide important context about the schools and triangulate some points of data provided in the interviews. Merriam (1998) lists several sources for observation, including the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, and what she calls "subtle factors" (p. 97-98). In these schools, I observed parent tours, parent association meetings, grade-level teacher meetings, and a few school-wide events. Finally, I relied heavily on a variety of documents, including demographic information on the New York State and U.S. Department of Education website and from the New York City Charter School Center, an independent non-profit organization designed to support the city's charter schools. In addition to these documents, I also analyzed the schools' websites for language regarding mission (more informative for the larger study) and student population as well as the schools' applications and informational materials distributed to prospective families.

Data Analysis

Data was systematically coded on paper and later with Atlas.ti at several points throughout the data collection process. The process of coding multiple times (even before the aid of software) helped solidify some of the final codes, emerging themes, and helped to validate or challenge patterns I noted in early interviews. During the first round of Atlas.ti coding, I focused primarily on codes that centered on my research questions for the larger study (e.g., student recruitment, parent

choice) and subcategories within each of those. In the second round of coding, I expanded the number of codes to capture observations and themes not directly related to these categories, streamlined several codes into fewer, and removed a few codes all together to ensure that codes were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998, p. 184). The iterative process of coding, re-coding, and sub-coding resulted in the identification of recurring patterns, categories, and themes that cut across the data, especially those points that supported, challenged, or helped to elucidate existing research. Both within-case analysis for each school and cross-case analysis among all four (Yin, 2002) helped identify themes that addressed the research questions, engaged with the literature, and portrayed a more nuanced picture of choice at the school level.

Contextualizing the School Sites

As stated above, the two sites were selected for the original study based on racial and ethnic demographic data. Collegiate Charter represents a racially and ethnically homogenous school, while Success Academy represents one that is more racially and ethnically diverse. Again, I chose to focus this paper on these two sites because both schools yielded a greater number of parent interviews due to the schools' existing structures for reaching out to parents. At the time, both schools were high performing according to the school progress reports, though struggling with some of the challenges facing many charter schools, namely principal and teacher turnover (see Table 2 for other characteristics). The descriptions below will discuss both of these aspects as well as the student composition of each school. In addition to giving readers a sense of the school context, this section will lay the groundwork for important themes that will emerge in the findings sections.

Table 2
School Site Characteristics

	Collegiate Charter	Success Academy
Borough	Bronx	Manhattan
Years in operation	>5	>3
Grades served	6-12	K-6
Enrollment	600	400
Percentage of students proficient in ELA/math	70/85	75/90
Average class size	19	24
Teacher turnover rate	42%	NA
Percentage of teachers without teaching license	40%	43%
Percentage of teachers with fewer than 3 years experience	17%	38%

Source: New York State School Report: Accountability and Overview Report, 2007-2008 and New York City Department of Education Progress Report, 2008-2009

Collegiate Charter School

Amid abandoned buildings, crumbling schools, and *bodega*-lined streets stands a building anomalous to its surroundings. Collegiate Charter, a charter school serving approximately 600 students, is located in Congressional District 1, one of the poorest congressional districts in the country. In addition, its local schools are part of one of the lowest performing school districts in all of New York City. According to its website, the relative low performance of the local public schools is the primary reason why the school was started. This vision is supported by the administration and

staff I interviewed, many of whom communicated that part of the school's design is to provide neighborhood students an alternative to failing schools. At least by way of test scores, the school had lived up to this promise at that time. At the time of data collection, the percentage of students at proficiency (Level 3 or 4) at Collegiate Charter was about 70 percent in English Language Arts and 85 percent in math compared, receiving an "A" on the school Progress Report.

Many charter schools face considerable challenges in their first few years, especially in the area of staff turnover (Struit & Smith, 2009). Both the teachers and the parents I interviewed described a high rate of teacher and principal turnover at Collegiate Charter. A lead teacher who started at Collegiate Charter in its third year, explained that the demanding expectations and critical feedback during the first few years was difficult for some teachers to stomach. She said, "You were evaluated all the time. There were people in your classroom, sometimes giving you really harsh feedback." She added that while some teachers improved their performance because of it, others left to work somewhere else perhaps less demanding. A science teacher in his sixth year at Collegiate Charter, also noted the high turnover: "We have so much teacher turnover here…some of it due to having some really bad teachers in some classrooms." Whether it was because of stringent demands or poor performance, teacher turnover was observed by many staff members and parents. In addition to teacher turnover, the school had been under the leadership of two different principals at the time of data collection.

The parent interviewees who had been at Collegiate Charter for longer than three years, while satisfied overall with the Collegiate Charter experience, noted some dissatisfaction with the rate of turnover. For example, the former PTA president, whose son has been attending Collegiate Charter for eight years, spoke more broadly about what she saw as constant change and the impact of that change. When asked what her son's experience in the school had been like, she said:

> There's been lots of transition…..I think that [it] could have been better if he didn't have to go through that because it did help slow down academics at Collegiate Charter. But for the most part, I know he was getting a general public education. Collegiate Charter is a step above, but when we went into the school, it was supposed to be three or four steps above. That didn't happen.

Though this parent is pleased that her son is receiving a sound education, she is also frustrated with the number of staffing changes and the effect they had on the school and her child – making it one "step above" instead of three or four as she was expecting. Across several interviews with parents at both schools, parents communicated a simultaneous satisfaction with their schools and a disappointment that their school fell short of its initial promises.

In addition to overall performance and challenges, the other facet of schooling I examined more closely was student composition. Collegiate Charter's mission is focused on serving the community and its particular student demographic. The school's charter and website makes it clear that they are seeking to serve an "at-risk" student population, going on to describe that most schools in the South Bronx are, by definition, schools for at-risk students. Collegiate Charter is thus designed to serve a particular group of family and students, and the school's student population is taken exclusively from the local area. Considering the demographics of the neighborhood (98% Black or non-white Hispanic), it is not surprising that Collegiate's student population is 100% Black and Latino and 79% are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. At the same time, the school has a smaller percentage of students designated with limited English proficiency: 6% versus the city average of 14%.

The school's student composition has implications for the school's capacity to effectively serve its student body. Staff described the many challenges of serving students whose home lives

and neighborhoods are educationally and economically disadvantaged. For example, the high school Assistant Principal said:

> Largely, students come from the surrounding district, where a very small percentage of the population graduated from college and roughly half of the students speak another language other than English at home. The intuition people have about the demographics in the South Bronx are not just stereotypes; they're largely true and along with those demographic realities comes educational necessities and we try to meet them the best that we can.

His characterization of the school's student composition touches on how family characteristics can impact they way they serve their students, including language proficiency (even for students not classified as English Language Learners) and parent education levels. Sometimes, these "demographic realities" pose challenges to the school and its staff, especially in terms of serving students with special needs.

Success Academy

Success Academy is located on a quiet, tree-lined street in a bustling neighborhood in lower Manhattan. When Success Academy first opened in 2006, it served kindergarten, 1st, 5th and 6th grades. In the year of the study, it served nearly 400 students on three floors of a newly constructed school building. Its building, which it shared with a regular public high school is equipped with art, music, and dance studios. It is these non-academic programs that attracted many of the parents I interviewed to the school. Parents valued the enrichment opportunities as an alternative to the singular focus on math and reading they encountered in other schools. The staff, on the other hand, expressed the most pride in the school's unique curriculum. Its mission is based on providing students a rich interdisciplinary curriculum centered on cultural history, enriched by outside activities and visual artifacts. Unlike Collegiate Charter, Success Academy's mission says nothing of serving a target population of underserved students, but rather focuses on a particular academic approach. The staff spoke more about Success Academy's curriculum than its actual results, but test scores at the time of the study were comparable to that of Collegiate Charter: about 75% of students scored at proficiency (Level 3 or 4) in English Language Arts and almost 90% in math.

As was the case at Collegiate Charter, the parents I interviewed at Success Academy held conflicting views of their school. Parents described several unmet promises over language classes with no teachers, a disappointing Saturday school, and a cultural history curriculum that never developed into what had been pitched to parents. But the main complaint was the turnover among administrators and teachers. Success Academy has been under the leadership of no fewer than five principals since 2006. One of the founding teachers explained, "Nobody lasts long….And because nothing was consistent, changes were being made constantly. So after last year, the entire lower school walked [out]." Thus, the departure of staff can sometimes result in even more staff leaving.

Another area of concern among some of the interviewees was student attrition. Teachers who had been at the school at least three years experienced many students and families leaving every year. One teacher called the school a "revolving door," citing that out of 200 students in the lower school, somewhere between 30 and 50 students left throughout the year before June. (Her estimate is based on the reading portfolios she maintains for students in the lower school.) The observation that there have been substantial losses of families over the years was one of the most salient points about Success Academy in my interviews at this school and will be explored later in the context of parent choices.
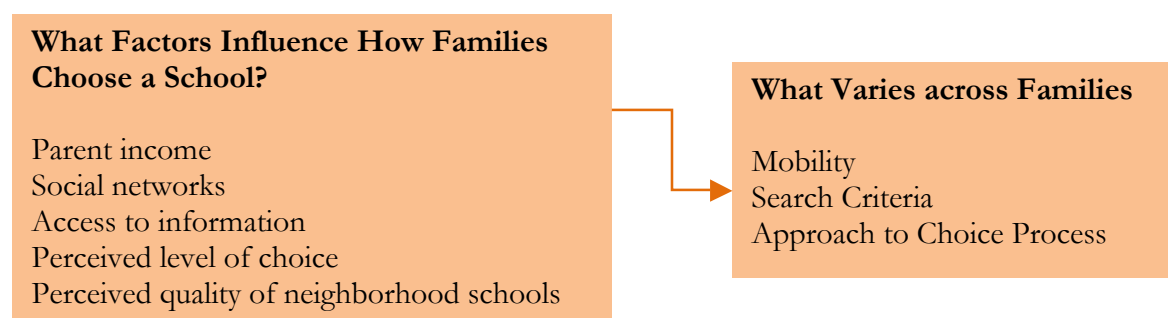
Success Academy's student population is more ethnically and economically diverse than that of Collegiate Charter and serves more non-Black and Latino students than most charter schools in the city. At the time, its student population was 75% Black or Latino, 17% Asian, 2% White, and 6%

multiracial. This breakdown makes Success Academy one of the more diverse charter schools in the city, even compared with other schools in the same neighborhood. Beyond race and ethnicity, all of the school staff I interviewed described that families come from all five boroughs and a variety of neighborhoods. Success Academy families also represent more diversity in terms of income level than the city as a whole: 41% of its students qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch, while the city average is 72% schools. The school's staff is aware of the socioeconomic diversity among their students, describing it as "mixed" and a "varied spectrum." One teacher noted that income levels were "extremely diverse," adding, "Some of the families are well-to-do, upper middle class and then you have some who are in shelters, and some who are lower middle class." The teachers I interviewed recalled anecdotal examples of income disparities in which some students enjoyed costly items, such as designer jeans, i-phones, and international vacations, while others could not afford a classroom field trip. As with Collegiate Charter, staff found it challenging to effectively serve all of their students considering their unique needs and the high turnover of leaders and teachers at their school.

Findings

Though these contexts differ in many ways, interviews with the parents in both of these charter schools provide rich examples of the asymmetrical access to information among parents who exercise school choice as described in the literature (André-Bechely, 2005; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bancroft, 2009; Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2007; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Wells, 1996; Witte, 1996). These interviews showed variations in both the processes parents used to select their schools and the selection criteria they applied in their decision making. While some parents described a comprehensive and strategic choice process, some chose their charter schools with substantially less information or effort. This is not to say that these parents were necessarily less motivated, but rather that they did not have the same means, time, or "know how" to conduct a more thorough search process (see Figure 1).

Different groups of parents also showed different behaviors when it came to deciding whether or not to stay in their charter schools. When the quality of these schools seemed to decrease, interviewees described that White, Asian, and affluent parents fled their charter schools immediately or within the same year, while the Black and Latino low-income parents were less willing to risk leaving for what they believed could possibly be a much worse option. Both of these behaviors – selecting schools only once they have gained a positive reputation and leaving poor performing schools – suggests that at least some parents might have had other options from which to choose (e.g., Montessori schools, private schools, selective programs in public schools).

What Factors Influence How Families Choose a School?

Parent income
Social networks
Access to information
Perceived level of choice
Perceived quality of neighborhood schools

What Varies across Families

Mobility
Search Criteria
Approach to Choice Process

Figure 1. Factors of influence on how charter school parents choose. Differences in information, networks, income, etc. create wide variation among parents in terms of choice processes, search criteria, and decisions to stay or leave ones charter school.

Variations in the Choice Process: Different Pathways to Charter Schools

One major difference in how parents talked about their choices was in how they described the process of choosing their schools. Parent choice practices among the interviewees in this study ranged from not actively searching at all to conducting a thorough and strategic search process. While a few parents did nothing beyond submitting the one-page application, some described an arduous selection process that involved internet research, school visits, applying to more than a few schools, and speaking with several principals. Some parents viewed choosing a school as challenging or difficult, describing the process similar to applying to a competitive college. One Success Academy parent of an elementary school student said that the district was a "convoluted system." She went on, "Your chances of getting into a good school are slim to none depending on the district." While there was an established choice process in the city at the time, for her and other parents I interviewed, ending up in a "good" charter school required jumping through several hoops and being as proactive as possible.

On the other hand, other parents described a choice process that entailed minimal activity or information seeking. This was especially prevalent among newer parents at Collegiate Charter, many of whom learned about the school because they lived in the neighborhood and had passed by the building. Other Collegiate Charter parents learned about their school through word of mouth and only applied to one school. One parent of a 6th grader in his first year at Collegiate received applications for several charter schools in the mail, but rather than trying to distinguish among them, she sent them all in. Other parents applied to Collegiate because their child's elementary school provided them an application. Though charter parents are often described as more motivated or selective, more than half of the Collegiate parents I interviewed (all of whom lived in the neighborhood) recounted little or no "search behaviors." This is consistent with Bell's (2009) findings that many parents show little or no "search behavior," opting instead for the local feeder schools.

Search behavior might also have changed over time, as charter schools become more prolific and well known to more parents and families. At Collegiate Charter, staff and parents who had been there for more than three years noted a shift between the search behavior of long-time Collegiate parents and newer Collegiate parents. The middle school principal described that early on, "particular" families were drawn to apply, but that is no longer the case:

> The change from previous years is that in the past, very few people knew about
> Collegiate Charter School and what it was doing, so it was attracting a select group of
> families that were savvy about finding about where the schools were and how to
> apply for them…Even though we were located in the neighborhood of all these
> other families and students, they didn't necessarily have the skills to go out and find
> out, "Well, when do I apply?" Even though it was a lottery system, it was still
> attracting certain types of families. So even though you recruited from everywhere,
> there were certain people that were aware of how to find out about the charter
> school and apply.

This administrator's response suggests that families selecting the school in its first years possessed more motivation or "know how" than those who applied in subsequent years.

Similarly, a parent who had enrolled her child into Collegiate during its first year drew a distinction between the parents who applied early on and parents who have applied in the last few years.

> People who were very, very interested in the type of education their children would
> have were the ones who would get on the computer and look for certain types of
> schools. I'm not saying that people don't do that now, but at that time, not that

many [did] from so-called underserved school districts. Now, underserved school
district people know, "I can put my child into a better school," so I think that's what
changed the demographics.

Now that the school is better known and recruitment strategies revolve around local middle and
elementary schools, parents who might not have conducted research on charter schools are more
likely to have heard about and apply for a spot at Collegiate Charter School. Though she herself is
from the neighborhood, this parent made a distinction between herself and the parents who have
been newly drawn to the school. She described that newer Collegiate Charter parents are not as
selective or motivated to seek out the best educational options as parents who enrolled before, but
rather that they just casually walk by and send their kids there because it's nearby.

Collegiate parents who had enrolled their children into the school early in its history
also cited the lack of active choice processes among newer parents to help explain a recent
shift in the school's demographics, as noted above. They described that this influx of
families who did not actively select a school or have to jump through as many hoops as they
did has implications for the types of students entering. One parent said she wished it had
remained the way it was before because the students now entering exhibit more behavior
problems than the students who entered early on. A few of these parents, for example,
complained of a recent surge in behavior problems among the incoming 6th graders and
connected it to the fact that their families did not seem as motivated or involved with their
children's schooling. These comments indicate that despite the racial, ethnic, and
socioeconomic similarities among students at this school, some parents believe there are
now different types of students attending Collegiate Charter.

At Success Academy, a similar – though not as pronounced – shift had occurred
from the earlier years of the school's inception. Because parents had played an important
role in getting the school off the ground, the parents I talked to who joined Success
Academy early on described a more comprehensive search process and had been particularly
proactive in selecting their children's school. Since then, the school has done far more active
outreach then Collegiate, promoting their school on multiple language radios and
newspapers and sending out a mass mailing across different boroughs. All of the
interviewees who were newer to the school responded that they heard about the schools
through one of these means of outreach. Thus, not only is there a range of search behaviors
and selection processes among charter school parents, there also seems to be a difference
between the behaviors exerted by parents who selected charter schools at the beginning of
their inception versus parents who have selected later, as the school gets a reputation or the
choice gets made easier. As seen at Collegiate Charter, this shift could have implications for
schools as student demographics change.

Variations in Selection Criteria: Different Priorities for Selecting Charter Schools

In addition to the selection process, reasons for selecting a school also varied substantially
across parent interviews, though certain patterns emerged. One of the commonalities among all of
the parents interviewed was a belief that their school was a good fit for their child. Though few
parents used the term "fit," they did communicate how that particular school would help fulfill their
own child's academic and nonacademic development. This is consistent with Bell's study (2009),
which found that a majority of parents chose schools based on academic *and* "holistic" reasons.
However, there was a difference among parents in *how* they spoke of and described these reasons.
When asked why they chose Collegiate Charter, 11 of the 12 parents cited immense dissatisfaction
with previous schools or with their local neighborhood schools. The sources of these complaints
included inattentive teachers, classes with more than 30 students, an unchallenging curriculum, and

school violence. Many of these parents – all Black or Latino and living in the Bronx – applied to more than one charter school and repeatedly described their choices in terms of intensely negative experiences in or perceptions of their local public schools rather than about specific characteristics of the charter school they had selected.

In contrast, Success Academy parents framed their choosing not so much as an escape from other schools, but rather as a move towards a particular set of school characteristics. Only two of the 12 parents – who represented a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds – interviewed at Success Academy recounted significant dissatisfaction with their previous schools (both over safety incidents), though two parents also complained that either instruction or achievement levels were low at their previous schools. While Collegiate Charter parents wanted a more "advanced" curriculum overall, Success Academy parents described that they were drawn to something specific about the curriculum of their school. One parent of two elementary school children said she particularly liked that it "wasn't just reading and math," while another who also noted that the focus was beyond math and English echoed, "Right away, I liked their mission: educate the whole child and teach above the test. That caught my attention." A parent, who had been at Success Academy since its first year, was originally drawn to the school because of the "philosophy of global and multicultural learning" and implementation of a historical lens across different subjects. A White parent who had originally been looking at a Montessori school and who was much newer to the school said:

> The reason I chose this school for my daughter is because I think she'll have a richer experience. Really, that's the bottom line. It's more progressive. And I didn't have any choices where I thought she would be happy. I just want her to be happy and have a positive experience. That's it. I don't really care that much about her education because I can take care of that. I'm a teacher. For me, it's more about fluff. The extra stuff. Art, music, dance.

These comments reflect some of the priorities of other Success Academy parents who said they were looking for something beyond the test prep focus of other schools and other charter schools.

The differences in responses between these parents and those of Collegiate Charter parents suggest that some schools may be able to attract a different group of parents by offering a unique curricular or instructional model. It is possible that parents who are drawn to a specific model rather than seeking a way out of failing or dysfunctional schools bring with them a certain level of social capital or a greater range of options than other parents, since their choice is motivated more by selectivity and less by a feeling of necessity. It should be noted that these parents' reasons for choosing may not have necessarily been met when they actually enrolled their children. The degree to which these schools have done so can help explain some of the dramatic attrition at Success Academy explored in the next section.

It should also be noted that in addition to parents choosing, schools sometimes choose as well. Though oversubscribed charter schools use a lottery (as these two schools did), schools have an option on how to weigh certain factors. For example, Collegiate chose to give preference to families who live in the neighborhood, while Success Academy weighs families from different neighborhoods equally. The larger study does, however, address some of the more subtle ways schools choose parents, including targeted recruitment and counseling certain students out. Though the schools' choices are not the focus of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that while parents may have different priorities, schools do as well. This is not necessarily a critique. Part of Success Academy's mission, for example, was to create a diverse student body; thus, their recruitment strategies and the weighing of their lottery were aligned to help meet this goal.

According to the school's leadership, offering a more progressive curriculum was another way to attract a more diverse set of parents. Maintaining their diversity over the years, however, became more difficult, as specific groups of parents decided to leave.

Variations in Choice Sets: Different Decisions about Leaving a Charter School

Staff and parents at Success Academy described substantial changes in student composition over the years. In particular, they described a marked decrease of non-minority and affluent families in the school. Here, these changes will be explored by examining the interviewee responses in light of "choice sets" (Lurie, 2004). While the staff and many parents commented on Success Academy's diversity, a few parents of color pointed out that the school's promise of racial diversity was greater than what they saw when their children actually enrolled in the school. One Black parent who enrolled his son during the school's 3rd year described:

> My own observation is different from what I was informed of at one of our open house meetings. We were told, generally speaking, the population should be about 40% African American, about 40% of people of Latino descent, and then about 10% Asian and 10% White….I don't think I've seen too many Asian kids. Quite frankly, I haven't noticed too many White kids.

Though attrition is an extensive problem among all groups at Success Academy, it has been particularly significant among White and Asian parents. The school dean, who had been at the school since its inception, confirmed this pattern: "The first year it was about 30-40% Black/African American, 25-30% Latino, 30% Asian, and 10% White. Slowly but surely, it's become more Black and Latino."

An Asian American parent who enrolled her child during the first year recounted similar statistics, indicating that the 20 students in her children's first class represented an almost equal mix of students by racial/ethnic group, and she was disappointed when a number of White and Asian parents subsequently pulled their children out, making her children's class less diverse. The school's first PTA president also echoed the change in demographics:

> I had White parents to the left and right of me and we were all marching to get this whole thing [approval of the school's charter]. The philosophy was great. The first year was a challenge and by the second year, I had lost 95 percent of the White parents.

Interviewing parents who had left these charter schools was outside the initial scope of this study, but the interviewees I spoke to explained these changes as a result of the parents' perception of school quality (or lack thereof). The same parent quoted above explained that the first year was extremely "chaotic," that the school lost a principal before the doors even opened, that teachers did not know how to implement the more progressive curriculum, that the Saturday program was dropped, and that half of the staff fled during the first year. He commented, "It was like, did anyone even read the instruction book here before they started a school?" The school dean also shared a similar assessment of the attrition among these parents:

> Behavior issues were a problem from the beginning. Management is a problem from the beginning. The big package – the great bicycle that you thought you were going to get for Christmas – didn't happen, so it was a big disappointment for teachers, for parents, for some students who were aware of what the school had to offer or supposedly had to offer. It was just a big disappointment, so they pulled their kids.

His comments resonate with what other respondents reported about the impact of turnover, classroom management problems, and a failure to deliver the curriculum as it was intended.

One of the school's early parents echoed this claim, while adding that it was a certain group of families who decided to leave:

> The school wasn't providing the creative curriculum. I think they [Asian parents] would have stayed if the curriculum was really intense and their kids were really getting into it, but things kept changing and as they realized they had to meet city and state standards, they had to make adjustments.

In other words, parents and staff identified the loss of certain groups as a direct result of parent dissatisfaction with the school.

By the same token, many Success Academy participants communicated that their school had to show significant success in order to attract and keep White and Asian parents, as one Black parent explained:

> When you are attracting people, you can't just fish in one pond. You have to fish in all the ponds. You do have to reach out to every ethnic group out there, but a valid equal attempt…..I think White people have a lot more options as far as where they can put their kids. Like I said before, as soon as the success of Success Academy becomes clears and our numbers are strong, people will come, and White people will come.

One of the founding teachers echoed this perspective stating, "I think it [attracting White and Asian families] would take a couple years of performance. Performing well. Develop that reputation again. Right now, we don't have a positive reputation. We have a reputation for being a mess." However, in the two years before this data was collected, some improvements had been made, including greater stability in terms of administration and staff. The school had also begun to provide the unique programs outlined by the original curriculum presented to parents. Their test scores in both math and English Language Arts had also improved over those two years. Some respondents connected these changes to a small increase in White students at their school. The parent quoted above commented on this recent change: "Our population will be a victim of our success…I like the fact that White parents are now looking to come back. Because they didn't have the guts to stick it out in the beginning." He believed that now that the school's reputation had improved, it had restored the faith of (especially White) parents who had left the school during the chaos of the first year.

These parents' explanations of who leaves and why may suggest that Black and Latino parents are not as interested in the quality or success of their charter schools as White or Asian parents, but an application of "choice sets" (Lurie, 2004) helps makes sense of the different decisions made among parents who are otherwise similarly dissatisfied. Much of the PTA's president's interview, for example, exposes his frustration over the disparity in options between low-income minority parents of color like himself relegated to failing public schools and more affluent parents, who can choose private schools or more easily navigate the system to get their children into exclusive public schools or selective programs within public schools. As stated above, he believes White parents have "a lot more options" than minority groups. He recounted:

> The administration would tell parents, "Well, if you're not happy here, go find someplace else." And I stood up and told them, "This *is* someplace else." We don't have the resources to go to Dalton and wherever and the fact that we choose not to go to our local zone schools means we expect more from you all. This is the dream that you want and we're willing to work with the dream….the reality is this *is* someplace else. We come from all over the city to come here because this is the philosophy [the founder] sold us on and we bought into it and now we want it. To the phrase, "You should go someplace else," I say, "No, we can't." Because if that was the case, I would have never been here from the get go.

His argument highlights what he believes to be the inequalities between different sets of families, calls into question the extent to which parents really choose, and suggests that parents choose from a different set of options. Again, parent choice sets may be determined by parent resources and social networks (Bell, 2009). Thus, the "choice sets" (Lurie, 2004) of parents who choose to leave (or wait to enroll in) these schools may have included more options, such as private schools, Montessori schools, or gifted and talented programs in public schools not as accessible to many low-income students of color. When asked if he would decide to stay or leave, he responded, "It's our best choice right now," alluding again to the perception of limited options.

On the other hand, parents with fewer resources, who were very dissatisfied with their neighborhood public schools, remained in their schools out of a sense that despite the flaws, these were still relatively superior options. One teacher described:

> A lot of the African American families are coming from neighborhoods …well, the local schools that their kids would be going to in comparison are…there's no contest. I'll take this school with 120 kids over the one with 200, 300 kids for my 5th grader any day.

Though many parents interviewed communicated dissatisfaction, they obviously had not pulled their children, and only a few had considered doing so at any point. Similarly, at least three interviewees at Collegiate Charter noted that even though they were dissatisfied with their experience at their school, the convenience of not having to search for another school until graduation was enough a motivator to stay. The two parents who complained of increased behavior problems at the school had also decided to stay despite their disappointment. This contradicts the argument that dissatisfied parents will leave their charter schools or that schools will act competitively to keep them; in this case, the incentive to stay was about avoiding a new search and not necessarily tied to satisfaction with the school.

Despite all of the turnover and unmet promises, these schools were still in these parents' perceptions better than their public school options. One parent at Collegiate Charter summarized: "I don't believe in public schools….I went to public schools. Back then it was better, but I don't think it's safe today. And the public school where I live, I don't want him there." It may be the case that while all parents can be objectively critical of their charter schools, only *certain* parents may have the option to leave (or perceive that they do). For some parents, keeping their children enrolled in their charter school depends on school quality and performance. But for some, choosing a charter and staying in it is not so much the *best* option; rather, it is perceived as the only one.

Discussion

It is often assumed that the presence of charter schools will increase the quality of schooling by giving parents the option to select better performing schools and leave schools that do not meet their needs and preferences. Interviews with parents in these two New York City charter schools, however, show some of the limitations of these assumptions. First, not all of the charter schools parents in this case study are selecting their charter schools by weighing different options or applying a comprehensive search process. Among the interviewees, the range of selection processes varied widely from parents who conducted thorough searches and visits to different schools to those who only filled out a one-page application. The fact that especially newer charter parents utilized an extremely limited search process calls into question the assertion that charter parents are necessarily selecting schools based on quality, performance, or how well those schools actually compare to other schools.

In addition, parents chose their charter schools (and remained in them) for a number of reasons – some academic, some not. In fact, parents who chose the more diverse school tended to put less emphasis on test scores than on the kinds of "experiences" these schools could provide. There was also some evidence that a more progressive educational environment could attract a more diverse student body. As in other markets, parents choosing schools are operating with bounded rationality (Simon, 1985, as cited in Bell, 2009). Bounded rationality theory allows us to examine these parents' choices as limited by their networks, information, and social capital (Bell, 2009). Thus, parents do not necessarily consider all of the schools accessible to their children, but rather a manageable number of schools based largely on personal recommendations. Parents with more social capital – who have access to more information or larger networks – could thus consider a greater number of schools. Moreover, the *type* of information and networks these parents rely on may make available different kinds of schooling options.

Finally, this study applied the principle of "choice sets" (Lurie, 2004) to parents' decision making. According to some of the parents in this study, the "choice sets" of White, Asian, and affluent parents appear to be larger, or at least different than, those of Black and Latino low-income parents. For example, the White and affluent parents in this study were more likely to enroll their children in a charter school that showed academic success *and* progressive educational elements (e.g., enrichment programs, project-based learning), while the choices of Black and Latino parents, especially those who live in the Bronx, appeared to be primarily motivated by the belief that a charter school would be superior to their other schooling options. The interviewees also reported that White, Asian, and more affluent parents behaved differently when confronted with dissatisfaction in their charter schools. This does not suggest, however, that Black or Latino parents were not equally dissatisfied with what they viewed as major shortcomings. Rather, it may show that the available options (or perceived options) for many low income families of color are limited in comparison to other parents. Some interviewees' responses at both Collegiate and Success Academy showed that they remained in their schools not necessarily because they were highly satisfied with them, but because they felt like it was their only option.

It is important to note that these views are informed by what the parents said about their own processes of choosing and how they reported perceiving the options of other parents. As a qualitative study of a limited number of parents from each school, this research does not attempt to systematically analyze correlations between parent background and parent choices; it does, however, provide some illustrative examples of how choice processes look for individual parents and more nuanced information about how those parents understand their own options and the options of others. Thus, it may help inform policy and practice around choice. First, it seems that though information may be publicly available, some parents need more support in terms of finding and navigating the information that is there. More efforts to make information online (and on paper) in more languages would also be important to the many non-native English speakers in the city. In recent years, the NYC DOE has made some important strides in these areas, publishing comprehensive school directories in nine different languages, making them available online, and holding school fairs for families. These efforts can be a model for other large urban districts. For parents who may not take advantage of these sources of data, it is also important to help build capacity among designated school staff, so that schools themselves can be conduits of information. Middle school counselors, for example, could serve as point people for providing parents more information and helping them navigate the search process, while also forming relationships with potential feeder high schools in the neighborhood and beyond.

When viewed as consumers, parents are predicted to choose "high quality" schools that serve their children the most effectively. However – as in many marketplaces – different groups of

parents do not have access to the same sets of information, networks, or resources (Andre´-Bechely, 2005; Bancroft, 2009; Bell, 2009; Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Consequently, certain parents will come to know about schools that other parents may remain unaware of. Interviews with parents in these charter schools show variations among parents in terms of their selection process, their selection criteria, and their reasons for staying. This research suggests that charter schools do not necessarily have to be of higher quality for parents to choose them; nor do charter school parents necessarily leave their charter schools when they are dissatisfied. It thus calls into question the argument that charter school policy alone will increase school quality. These interviewees also raise questions about the potential for charter schools to necessarily create more equitable schooling, since many of the parents still felt like other more affluent parents had different options in a choice rich environment like New York City. Without acknowledging the different types of choice sets available to parents – helped shaped by social capital and other resources – charter school policy cannot alone ensure more equitable schooling for students and their families.

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About the Author

Adriana Villavicencio
Research Alliance for New York City Schools, New York University
adriana.villavicencio@nyu.edu
Adriana Villavicencio is a Research Associate at the Research Alliance for New York City
Schools. Prior to pursuing her graduate studies, Dr. Villavicencio served as a department chair at
a charter high school in Oakland, California, as an English teacher in Brooklyn, New York, and
worked on the development of a new school in Bangalore, India. Villavicencio holds a B.A. in
English from Columbia University, an M.A. in English Education from Teachers College,
Columbia University, and a Ph.D. from New York University Steinhardt School of Culture,
Education, and Human Development.

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