

SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS:
A NATURALISTIC-CONSTRUCTIVIST INQUIRY
INTO PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON SCHOOL CHOICE AND SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT AT A PEDAGOGICALLY PROGRESSIVE CHARTER SCHOOL

By

Emily Louise Gibson

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction
Boise State University

May 2011

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS

of the dissertation submitted by

Emily Louise Gibson

Dissertation Title: School Choice Decisions: A Naturalistic-Constructivist Inquiry into Parents' Perceptions on School Choice and School Improvement at a Pedagogically Progressive Charter School

Date of Final Oral Examination: 10 December 2010

The following individuals read and discussed the dissertation submitted by student Emily Louise Gibson, and they evaluated her presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

Scott Willison, Ph.D.	Chair, Supervisory Committee
Keith Thiede, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee
William Parrett, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee
Sara Fry, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the dissertation was granted by Scott Willison, Ph.D., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The dissertation was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my former students and their families.

To my Blue Heron crew, this research started with you.

* * *

In loving memory of those who's journeys ended before this one did:

My mom, Holly Lee Hendricks Gibson,

and

My friends, Red, Georgia, and Arcy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to everyone who encouraged, supported, and celebrated the journey that resulted in this accomplishment. In addition, I would like to send out special recognitions to the following people:

My committee: Dr. Scott Willison, Dr. Sara Fry, Dr. William Parrett, and Dr. Keith Thiede. At the end of my comprehensive evaluation, you asked, “What exactly *is* your methodological grounding?” That question forever changed the course of this dissertation as well as my future research. Furthermore, I appreciate that you were willing to risk letting me go home to write, trusting that I *would* finish.

The participants: 33 thoughtful, generous parents. You spoke freely about topics fraught with potential controversy, and you moved theory forward in bold new directions. To “Cool Guy” and “Jade,” your response and feedback on the nearly final draft was invaluable, and you are delightful, indelibly memorable hosts.

My family of friends: you kept me grounded during this process and served as my home base, regardless of my state. And Sharon, Jennifer, Kathy & T.J., your consistent and unwavering support played a significant role in this accomplishment.

My family: especially Stuart—you had a knack for showing up when I was hanging on by my fingernails and needed a visit and a pep talk, and Dad—I still am so delighted you made it to my comps defense!

My peer-debriefers and member-checkers from similar situated contexts: Randy, Sherry, Pam, Sally, Jen, Kathy, Pam, and Dave. Your eye-time, thoughtful questions, and exclamation points of delight truly improved this document.

My HSU master's thesis committee: Dr. Sally Botzler, Dr. Keri Gelenian, Dr. Eric Van Duzer, and Dr. Cathleen Rafferty. You planted the original idea for this work during my thesis defense, when I thought I was *finally* done with school, but you said, "You should keep going. Get your doctorate." Okay, got it... Am I done now?

Last but not least: Dr. Scott Willison, my committee chair, research advisor, professor, and colleague. You had the wisdom to give me enough rope to run with all our projects, as well as the skillful ability to help me figure out how to coil that rope and where to put it when I was finished. I am ever grateful for your support and insight, as well as your deep-seated enthusiasm for the research process.

ABSTRACT

Politicians and educational leaders often cite school choice as a sound mechanism for improving public education. However, education theorists and researchers call for more research to verify whether and how choice has an impact on what happens in public schools for all learners, and suggest that there is a need for more naturalistic-constructivist studies to examine the realities inherent in school choice contexts. Missing from the research literature are in-depth perspectives of those on the front lines of school choice decision: parents.

This naturalistic-constructivist inquiry used grounded theory and mixed methods to examine parents' recollections of their own elementary education experiences, perspectives on their children's schooling experiences before and after school choice decisions, and perceptions of school choice as a mechanism for school improvement. Data collection included a demographic survey, school and community data, and semi-structured interviews with 33 parents who enrolled children at a progressive charter public school in a northwestern state during the 2009-2010 school year. Emergent-grounded theory methods were used throughout data collection and analysis to develop a theory that reflected parents' perceptions in this context, in relation to school choice in other, broader contexts.

The results of this study can inform policy makers, educators, and theorists about how school choice influences parents' perceptions of and decisions about school

improvement and public schooling. Findings within the three themes of Who Chooses and Why, Parental Involvement, and Outcomes of Choice included:

- School choice decisions are tied to parents' reasons for choice, parents' demographics, and the types of schools being selected. School choice decisions are complex mosaics of influences, and may be further complicated by potential barriers in learning about and accessing schools of choice.
- Participants identified both a moral imperative as citizens to provide good public schools for all children and a moral duty as parents to provide their own children with the best opportunities and education possible, and recognized conflicts in meeting both.
- Parental involvement is related to how much a school encourages and utilizes parents for purposes that validate parents' time by engaging them actively with children and necessary tasks.
- A symbiotic relationship exists between parents, who have an interest in being involved, and the school, which needs and expects parental involvement, resulting in enhanced success for students and the school.
- Parents perceived that choice would not improve the educational opportunities for students who do not access schools of choice. Instead, choice will divide schools into parallel schooling systems.
- The primary tool for school improvement, according to parents in this study, is changing the culture of schools through combining parental involvement with choice.

This naturalistic-constructivist theory resulted in a grounded theory reflecting parents' perceptions of school improvement, parental involvement, and the private and public goods of education in a democratic society.

Keywords: school choice, school improvement, charter schools, parent perceptions, parent involvement, schooling in democracy, grammar of schooling.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xvi
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	xvii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	7
Improving Public Schools.....	7
Public Good, Private Good.....	7
“Choice Has Worked!”.....	9
Pedagogy and Class.....	11
Choice.....	13
Who Chooses and Why.....	13
Enrollment Decisions and Demographics.....	17
Parental Involvement.....	19
Satisfaction of Parents.....	19
Outcomes of Involvement.....	20
Middle-Class and Working-Class Differences.....	22
Rationale and Purpose.....	24
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS.....	26
Theoretical and Methodological Grounding.....	26

Pilot Study.....	26
Naturalistic-Constructivist Research Paradigm	27
Emergent-Grounded Theory	28
Methods Utilized.....	28
End Product—Case Study.....	29
Description of Setting	29
Context.....	29
Purposive Sampling	31
Participants.....	33
Data Collection	33
Data Collection Procedures.....	33
Instruments.....	35
Analysis.....	37
Quality Criteria for Trustworthiness.....	38
Credibility	39
Transferability.....	41
Dependability and Confirmability	41
Reflexivity.....	43
Benefits, Limitations, and Ethics	43
Benefits and Potential Outcomes	44
Limitations and Transferability.....	45
Ethics and Issues	46
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS—WHO CHOOSES AND WHY?	48

Demographics and Diversity	48
Participant Demographics.....	48
Parents’ Own Elementary Education Experiences	50
Community Diversity.....	51
School Demographics	54
Catalyst for Change and Choice	58
Becoming Motivated to Leave and/or Choose.....	58
Learning About Available Choices.....	65
Perceptions About Choosing Families.....	69
More Similar Than Different	69
Choosing Influences Homogeneity of Choosing Families	72
Perceiving Equity and Access to Choice	74
Perceiving Potential Barriers to Access.....	75
Perceptions About Choosing and Choosers.....	79
Fairness, Luck, and the Lottery.....	81
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS—PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT.....	85
The Complexities of Being Involved in Schools.....	85
A World of Difference.....	86
Nature or Nurture?	89
Guilt and Pressure: Living up to Expectations	95
Supporting the School Financially.....	98
Increasing Involvement in Regular Public Schools.....	104
Recognizing and Struggling with Private and Public Goals of Schooling	107

Public Goal: Moral Responsibility for All Children.....	107
Conflicts of Citizens as Parents	108
Private Goal: Moral Duties as Parents	110
Uniting the Public and Private Goals of Education	114
CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS—OUTCOMES OF CHOICE	117
Reflecting on Choice	117
Curriculum and Pedagogy.....	118
Meeting the Needs of All Learners: GATE, General Education, and Special Education.....	119
Focus on Community Building.....	123
It’s Not All Roses.....	125
Perceiving Northern as a Model for Other Schools	126
School Choice as a Mechanism for School Improvement.....	129
The Mechanism of Choice	129
Choice Improves Some but Not All.....	131
The Market Force of Competition	132
Provision of Models.....	133
Open Enrollment.....	135
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION.....	138
Overview of This Study.....	138
Findings and Interpretations	139
Who Chooses and Why.....	139
Parental Involvement	141

Outcomes of Choice.....	146
Recommendations.....	148
Who Chooses and Why: Equity and Access to Choice Options.....	148
Parental Involvement: The Complexities of Families, Schools, and Democracies.....	149
Outcomes of Choice: Giving Voice to Those Using Exit Options	151
Suggestions for Further Research	153
Replicate in Different Contexts	153
New Research: “First Initiators” and the Power of Social Networks	153
New Research: Grammars of Parental Involvement.....	154
Pilot Study: Implementing Exit Interviews.....	154
Summary of Significance.....	154
Grounded Theory.....	156
REFERENCES	157
APPENDIX A.....	163
Instrument: Interview Protocol	
APPENDIX B	165
Pilot Study Outcomes and Influences on Instruments	
APPENDIX C	171
Reflexivity/Reflection Summary	
APPENDIX D.....	180
Recruitment Script	

APPENDIX E	182
Introductory Letter to Participants	
APPENDIX F.....	185
Follow-up Email to Respondents	
APPENDIX G.....	187
Follow-up Email to Non-respondents	
APPENDIX H.....	189
Instrument: Demographic Survey	
APPENDIX I	191
Table of Raw Data from Demographic Surveys	
APPENDIX J	193
School Demographic Tables, Sorted	

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Occupations of Parents in Home	49
Table 4.2 Comparison of Parents' and Children's Education Placement	50
Table 4.3 Comparison of Types of Schools Parents and Children Attended.....	50
Table 4.4 Prior Schools of Attendance and Number Transferred.....	55
Table 4.5 Demographics of Previous Public Schools Attended by Participants' Children	56
Table 4.6 Types of Choice Options Participants Previously Accessed for Children.....	58
Table 4.7 Type of Sending School.....	59
Table 4.8 Type of Public School Children Attended During Previous Year	59
Table 4.9 Reasons/Motives/Catalysts for Seeking Choice	61
Table 5.1 Types of Parental Involvement and Number of Families That Participated.....	86
Table I.1 Raw Data from Demographic Survey	192
Table J.1 Percentage English Language Learners (ELL)	194
Table J.2 Percentage Free & Reduced Lunch (F&R Lunch)	194
Table J.3 Percentage Gifted and Talented Education (GATE).....	195
Table J.4 Percentage Special Education (SpEd)	195
Table J.5 Percentage Average Daily Attendance (ADA)	196

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 5.1. Starburst Plot of Eligible Families 53

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Public Schools: Any school funded by public funds. Includes magnet, charter, and neighborhood schools within a district.

Charter Public School: A publicly funded school that has a distinct charter. Pulls attendance from a wide area or district, not limited by neighborhood of residence.

Regular Public School: A publicly funded school (often called a “neighborhood” or “traditional” school), it normally pulls attendance from the surrounding neighborhoods, as has been the tradition during recent U.S. education history.

School Choice: In this study’s situated context, school choice refers to public school choices in a state with mandatory intra-district open enrollment, where students living within a district’s boundaries may choose among any of a district’s schools, and voluntary inter-district open enrollment, where neighboring districts may offer open enrollment to students residing outside of their district boundaries (School Choice, 2009).

Open Enrollment: Families may sign up for a school other than their school of residence on a first-come, first-serve basis, depending on availability of open seats. Families are responsible for transportation if normal bus routes are not convenient.

Parents: In this study, I interviewed adults who were parents/guardians of children. Because all adults were either biological or adoptive parents, the term “parents” is used throughout.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In the United States, current political and educational policies increasingly call for school choice as a method for improving public schools (Berends, Springer, Ballou, & Walberg, 2009). School choice is currently one of the most frequently touted mechanisms for improving education (Jones-Sanpei, 2008), such that two current academic journals are devoted to publishing research on issues of school choice and school improvement, universities sponsor graduate programs in the same areas, and several national organizations sponsored the first National School Choice Week in January, 2011. In recent decades, the use of competition and choice to encourage innovation, improvement, and academic excellence have been hot topics for all stakeholders in education and schooling, including administrators and school board members (Loveless & Field, 2009).

However, school choice as a strategy for improving educational opportunities is not a recent concept (Kemerer, 2009). In the United States, the experiment of school choice firmly entered into the arena of public school debate in the late 1960s, when Magnet schools were developed to encourage voluntary desegregation in urban districts (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). Up until that time, school choice options for families were limited to moving into a different school or district's area (also called Tiebout Choice), home schooling, or paying for private school tuition (Hoxby, 2000). Over the past 50 years, school choice options have expanded to include alternative high schools for students at risk of dropping out, open enrollment policies within and between districts,

voucher plans, independent study/home school programs, tax credits, vouchers, and charter public schools (Berends et al., 2009; Levin, 2009; Maddaus, 1990).

In my career as an educator, my concerns about educational equity and access—especially for students who traditionally are not well served by our public school system—led me to school choice as a possible answer. After working in alternative school settings in which I worked closely with parents to find solutions for their children’s learning needs, I realized the importance of families’ perspectives on education and choice decisions. In graduate level courses, I read Goodlad’s (1997, 2004) and Dewey’s (1916) descriptions of the purposes of education in a democratic society, and learned more about the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation as a political remedy for the vast discrepancies between successful schools and unsuccessful schools (Barr and Parrett, 2007). After reading Kohl’s (1994, 1967) and Kozol’s (2005) critiques of inner city schools’ failures, Delpit’s (1996) questioning of progressive, constructivist teaching methods, and Apple’s (2000) essays on the inherent fallacies of market metaphors, I began to question the true outcomes of choice, and whether real improvement for all students could ever arise from choice.

According to Goodlad (1997), “education and democracy are inextricably woven together” (p. 32). Though economic theory has little to do with the moral imperative of investing in education, for the good of individuals as well as the good of all, the mechanisms of economics in our culture continue to dominate:

The concepts of education as a human right, the immorality of its denial, and the danger of this denial to a democratic society are viewed by many as strange, almost comical, idealism that has little place in the ‘real’ world. (Goodlad, 1997, p. 36)

An education can be considered both a private good, in that individual citizens benefit from their education, as well as a public good, in that a society benefits from having an educated populous that can rise to the challenges and responsibilities of democracy (Goodlad, 1997; Meier, 1995).

Unfortunately, “The case for the public purpose of schooling in increasing educational capital for all has been overwhelmed by the surge toward the private purpose” (Meier, 1995, p. 64) of educational outcomes for individuals. Clarifying the private/public good dilemma described by Meier (1995) and Goodlad (1997) above, in 2009, Levin wrote:

If education was strictly a private good, then the market and universal choice would be the game. If education was strictly a public good, then public decision making and funding would rule. However, education is a ‘mixed’ good because it provides benefits both private and public. (p. 19)

While Meier (1995) supported choice, she expressed concern that it could lead to the privatization of the common public school:

The alternative to privatization is good public education, and choice is the catalyst that opens the door for the kind of dramatic restructuring that most agree is needed to produce a far better educated citizenry. (p. 103)

Research on the outcomes of choice, however, is mixed. Some argue that markets reward excellence by establishing incentives for educators to satisfy customers (Loveless & Field, 2009) while others find “no direct causal relationships between bringing market mechanisms to education and inducing educational innovation” (Lubienski, 2003, p. 428).

Despite this controversy and concern, school choice is increasingly framed as a tool for improving “the performance of disadvantaged students and racial/ethnic minorities” (Hill & Jochim, 2009, p. 8). According to Hill and Jochim (2009),

proponents of choice have long argued that the public school system has failed in providing equitable, adequate educational options for disadvantaged students. Parents must be provided a means for opting out of inadequate neighborhood schools (Hill & Jochim, 2009, p. 8). One choice offered to parents is charter public schools, which are “government-funded but governed and operated by private boards” (Berends et al., 2009, p. xvii).

In 1991, Minnesota enacted the first charter school law, and to date 39 states and the District of Columbia have followed suit (Kemerer, 2009). In 2009, nearly 4,000 charter schools enrolled over one million students, representing about 1/55 of the nation’s students (Kemerer, 2009). In 1997, Barr and Parrett aptly summarized what continues to define charter school legislation:

The driving force behind charter schools has been the desire to improve education for all students. Charter legislation has been supported by school boards, businesses, and by innovative and alternative school educators who see the concept as a way of gaining freedom from regulation and gaining ownership of their local school. (p. 146)

Charter schools utilize market forces of choice and competition, and “the aim of charter-enabling state legislation is to promote educational diversity, effectiveness, and accountability” (Berends et al., 2009, p. xvii). However, whether charters live up to this aim is debated, and the research on equity is mixed:

Charters promote equity by giving disadvantaged families choices that they would not otherwise have, but only the most motivated or informed may be taking advantage of the new options. (Loveless & Field, 2009, p. 111)

According to Loveless and Field (2009), not all students have the option of choice.

The more I read about the ideals of public schooling, the goals of charter school legislation, and the concerns regarding using market mechanisms, the more I questioned

my previous, rather un-informed commitment to choice, progressive pedagogy, and charter schools. Finally, reading Hirschman's (1970) seminal work on market forces in social institutions, which informed Levin's (2009) above description of the public/private dilemma, helped me combine the threads of choice, improvement, and public schooling into a potential theory. Parents' public and private goals of education align with our school system's dual goals of teaching students to be participants in a democratic society as well as successfully competing in our capitalist economy, but choice introduces an "exit option" to parents who are consumers of a public, social institution that is actually best improved through "voice" (Hirschman, 1970). Exit through choice allows families to focus on meeting their private goals, perhaps to the detriment of the common school's public goals. Somehow, as institutions that provide both public and private goods, public schools must find a way to improve through both exit and voice, and allow parents to exercise both choice and involvement.

The ongoing, rising debate about the merits and pitfalls of school choice, combined with my own professional experiences and uncertainty about what I once held true as an educator, led me to seek out parents' experiences of school choice to provide clarity and perspective on the issues involved in choice, since parents are the ones actually making decisions and seeing the outcomes for their children. The literature on school choice lacks in-depth case studies of how choice plays out in particular settings, for particular families, and since the contexts of choice are multifaceted, encompassing multiple realities, I wanted to tap into the complexity of perspectives, rather than find the most common perspective. Instead of beginning with a hypothesis, I started with an open-ended question, using grounded theory to construct meaning during and after data

collection. I wanted to know how a group of parents who had exercised a choice option perceived choice as an instrument for school improvement, from both private perspectives as parents, and public perspectives as community members.

For all of these reasons, I selected a naturalistic-constructivist research design for this study. Chapter Three explains the methods and rationale for using this design, describes the context and participants in this study, and reviews the data collection and analysis procedures. The recommended method for sharing the results of a naturalistic-constructivist study using grounded theory is through a case study, and often multiple chapters are used to share a case study's findings (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Thus, three chapters represent the findings: Chapter Four addresses participant and context descriptive statistics before focusing on the first major theme, Who Chooses and Why; Chapter Five proceeds with the second major theme, Parental Involvement; and Chapter Six explores this study's final major theme, Outcomes of Choice and Involvement. The last chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Seven, includes a discussion of what we can learn from this school choice context by connecting the findings to the literature in order to theorize how parental involvement intersects with school choice, and how policy makers and school leaders may be able to capitalize on parental involvement and choice to drive school improvement.

While I entered this study biased towards choice as a positive force for improving equity and access to quality education, my review of the literature challenged my thinking on multiple levels. The next chapter explores themes in the literature related to school choice as a vehicle for school improvement, including research on improving public schools, choice, and parental involvement.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature surrounding parents' perceptions of school choice was started before data collection, and continued during analysis in order to pursue themes that emerged during the study. The three main areas of literature I examined for this study included improving public schools, choice, and parental involvement.

Improving Public Schools

The literature reviewed in the area of school improvement included an examination of the intended purposes of public schooling, the rationale for using market forces of choice and competition to improve schools, and how class status intersects with choice, pedagogy, and the goals of public schooling.

Public Good, Private Good.

Schools serve a dual purpose: to prepare students to participate in a class-based, capitalist economy, and to prepare students to participate in a diverse, democratic society (Goodlad, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In an economic analysis of school choice, Levin (2009) explained:

Education as a private good refers to its ability to confer benefits to individuals and their families. Education as a public good refers to its contribution to the functioning and maintenance of a productive and democratic society. (p. 19)

An emphasis on school choice views education as a private good, perhaps to the detriment of education as a public good. As Levin (2009) clarified:

The private good aspect suggests a large component of family choice. The public good aspect suggests the need for societal decisions to design a common

experience that will contribute to greater equity, social cohesion, and citizen participation. (p. 20)

While one could argue that public schools as they exist today may not be reaching these public good goals, the influence of choice may not help, either.

According to Hirschman (1970), participants of economic systems and social systems have different methods for airing grievances and influencing change within each system. Economic and market systems primarily respond to the “exit” option, which occurs when consumers leave the organization or stop buying products (Hirschman, 1970). The exit option harms that which is left behind in the form of lost revenue, which causes organization leaders to correct the reasons consumers left. Social and political systems, however, primarily respond to the “voice” option, in which consumers express dissatisfaction directly, with the intent of improving the organization or product (Hirschman, 1970). Thus, the private good of education can be related to the goal of preparing individuals to function in a class-based, capitalist economy, which would best respond to the exit option, and the public good of education can be related to the goal of preparing individuals to function in a diverse democratic society, which would best respond to the voice option.

Prior to Hirschman’s (1970) work, Friedman (1962) advocated the introduction of the market mechanism of choice into the public school system, via a voucher plan. He reasoned that parents could express their preferences for education by sending their children directly to the schools they wanted (exit option) rather than the indirect, cumbersome channels of moving to a new school district or engaging in political mechanisms within the school to enact necessary changes (voice option) (Friedman, 1962). At the time of Hirschman’s (1970) writing, the main choice options available for

families were private schools. Thus, Hirschman (1970) viewed choice as siphoning off families that could afford private tuitions.

Today, with an increased availability of school choice options to a wider range of families, Hirschman's (1970) caution about the negative impacts of exit options on social and political systems resonates deeply:

...those customers who care *most* about the quality of the product and who, therefore, are those who would be the most active, reliable, and creative agents of voice are for that very reason also those who are apparently likely to exit first in case of deterioration. (p 47, emphasis in original)

Families who exit their regular public schools are choosing to go for a variety of reasons, but their exit removes their voices from the school improvement process, theoretically leaving fewer active participants in the regular public schools to enact change and improvement.

“Choice Has Worked!”

Unfortunately, school choice advocates, especially within the political arena, often rely on anecdotal, impressionistic evidence rather than empirical evidence to support school choice (Apple, 2000; Henig, 1994). In 1994, Henig used a 1989 quote from President Bush to illustrate this tendency: “Almost without exception, wherever choice has been attempted, choice has worked” (p. 117). According to Apple (2000), choice advocates’ “rhetoric of justification for preconceived beliefs about the supposed efficacy of markets...have been based on quite flawed research” (p. 59). The studies themselves are flawed, having poor credibility and generalizability (Henig, 1994), and the studies’ interpretations are equally flawed: “One study is as good as another, and the weight of the evidence is determined by counting the studies on opposing sides” (Henig,

1994, p. 128). Though the phrase *choice has worked* makes a good campaign tag line, the research does not support its use.

The dual outcomes of public/democratic and private/capitalist goals described above are not necessarily supportive of each other, and the swings and pulls of both education reform and the political climate in the United States over the past 150 years, driven in part by these conflicting goals, have caused our regular public schools to emphasize one or the other to a greater degree at any given time (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Added to these tidal pulls is the deeper resistance to change, best described by Tyack and Cuban (1994) as “the grammar of schooling.” The grammar of schooling describes the inherent model of how school should be, which is imprinted on every graduate of public schooling:

Indeed, much of the grammar of schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the way schools are. It is the *departure* from customary practice in schooling or speaking that attracts attention. (Tyack & Cuban, 1994, p. 454, emphasis in original)

School reforms that challenge this grammar, no matter how appropriate they are for learners and learning, tend to fade with time, reabsorbed by institutional norms (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

In conjunction with the resistance to change that comes from the grammar of schooling, the use of market forces to change social systems only serves to replicate, not improve the status quo (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). Middle-class families inhabit an ease and effortlessness in bringing economic, social, and cultural capital (resources) to bear on markets used in social systems (Apple, 2000). Thus, those who have the capital will continue to use market forces to their advantage, while those without capital will not. As a result, choice will not challenge the way regular public schools operate and will not

challenge the inequities of social class (described further in the next section). While schools of choice may utilize different grammars of schooling that indeed remedy inequities tied to class status, those very differences make models of choice less likely to be adopted by regular public schools because they *do* utilize different grammars of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1994, 1995).

Pedagogy and Class

For children from middle-class families who already come to school with the social cultural capital to participate in the economic system, U.S. public schools provide the education necessary for participation in the democratic system (Cox & Witko, 2008; Delpit, 1996; Lareau, 1987; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998). Progressivist and constructivist pedagogy works for middle and upper-class students because they come to school with the required background (Chenoweth, 2009; Schneider et al., 1998). Engaging in curriculum that develops individual interests, encourages independence and creativity, and supports learner-constructed ideas can be successful for students from middle-class backgrounds because they already have the keys to success in the economic system (Delpit, 1996; Gorman, 1998; Lareau, 1987; Schneider et al., 1998).

For working-class and lower income students, the keys of written and oral communication, proper diction, and conformity to the norms of society are necessary for them to succeed economically (Gorman, 1998; Schneider et al., 1998; Whitman, 2008). Progressivist and constructivist pedagogy, done less than superbly, may set working-class and lower income students up for failure in the economic system, never giving them a chance to actively participate in the democratic system (Chenoweth, 2009; Delpit, 1996; Gorman, 1998; Lareau, 1987; Whitman, 2008).

Delpit (1996) aptly described the above concerns about the implementation of progressivist methods for all children:

To provide schooling for everyone's children that reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, to ensure that power, the culture of power, remains in the hands of those who already have it. Some children come to school with more accoutrements of the culture of power already in place—'cultural capital,' as some critical theorists refer to it—some with less. Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes. (p. 28)

Delpit (1996) further explained that parents functioning outside of the culture supported by more open-ended, constructivist pedagogy want their children to have access to the knowledge, including discourse patterns, interaction styles, and both spoken and written language, that will allow them to succeed in society. In addition to not receiving the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, with some types of progressive, process-based methods, students who do not come to school already possessing the needed skills are often quickly labeled remedial and funneled into pull-out programs that further limit their access to the knowledge and skills necessary for participating successfully in this country's democratic and economic systems. As a result, these students may not realize either the public or the private goals of education (Delpit, 1996).

In summary, U.S. society is segregated along race/ethnic, education, and class lines (Cox & Witko, 2008; Garcia, 2008; Gorman, 1998). Regular public schools have taught to the middle—the middle-class (Schneider et al., 1998). Students from low-income, working-class, and/or minority backgrounds have not found consistent academic success in regular public schools, something NCLB seeks to remedy by requiring all schools to provide all students with the academic skills necessary for success in a

capitalist economy (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Schneider et al., 1998). But regular public schools' emphasis on academic goals may overshadow the development of democratic citizens (Maddaus, 1990; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), as the following research on who chooses schools of choice can help illustrate.

Choice

The literature reviewed in the area of choice included the reasons parents choose schools, the impact those choices have on chosen schools as well as the schools left behind, and the intersections of demographics and social class on school choice, enrollment decisions, and charter schools. Before discussing the literature about choice, it is important to understand how the very definition of school choice varies from study to study. For example, the Carnegie Foundation (1992) focused on district or state 'open enrollment plans' in their examination of school choice, Bauch and Goldring's (1995) research compared regular public schools, magnet schools, and Catholic private schools, while Weiher and Tedin's (2002) work examined school choice decisions between regular public schools and charter public schools. As a result, comparing studies on school choice can be problematic.

Who Chooses and Why

School choice is intended to improve the academic excellence and equity of regular public schools (Maddaus, 1990). However, the outcomes of school choice, or the potential outcomes, raise equity and access concerns (Hirschman, 1970). School choice critics are concerned that, if parents are permitted to choose where their child goes to school, schools will become even more segregated in regards to race/ethnicity, socio-

economic status (SES), and/or education levels (Fossey, 1994; Maddaus, 1990; Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

The terms “creaming” or “skimming” describes the theory that schools of choice will become elite schools that siphon off the most desirable students, leaving the rest of the students behind in substandard regular public schools (Barrett, 2003; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). In contrast, “cropping” refers to the theory that choice schools focused on serving the needs of struggling learners will crop those students out of regular public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2002). In a meta-analysis of the literature, Wells (2009) concluded:

Charter school reform, due to its lack of safeguards, supports, or incentives for families to do otherwise, leads to more and not less racial and social class segregation, as well as a skimming of relatively advantaged students—in terms of parents’ education and involvement, and lack of disabilities or English language limitations—compared to those in nearby public schools. (p. 174)

Thus, the reasons families make choices, and the complex interplay among these reasons, could lead to better understanding of how choice may lead to increased segregation within schools and districts.

Many parents make initial school choices via their selection of a home and neighborhood within a school’s attendance area (Hoxby, 2000; Maddaus, 1990). This original school choice is also called Tiebout choice, and is most utilized in areas with many school districts to choose from, or within districts having many schools with different structures and foci to choose from. Under Tiebout choice, parents with the income and flexibility to live in neighborhoods with higher income and education demographics are more likely to live near “good” schools (Hoxby, 2000; Maddaus, 1990). According to Maddaus (1990), it is only when the schools available in the

neighborhood are not satisfactory—for academic, religious/values, demographic, and other reasons—that parents examine other options. This is where the literature shows the relationships between demographics of parents and how they decide. Parents with more time and income have more flexibility in their choices, and are able to overcome barriers of transportation more easily than parents with time and income constraints (Maddaus, 1990).

Middle and upper-class parents are more likely to be involved in their children's schools, be aware of other options, and follow through on choices of other schools for their children (Schneider et al., 1998; Witte & Thorn, 1996). Working-class parents tend not to be as involved in their children's schooling, and are often not aware of the choices or how to find out about the choices (Gorman, 1998; Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1994; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). The majority of parents learn about school choice options through word of mouth, and parents tend to communicate with other parents in their family/social circles (Chung-Kai & Chia-Hung, 2009; Maddaus, 1990). Thus, middle and upper-income parents, by virtue of their contacts, are more likely to know about available choices (Chung-Kai & Chia-Hung, 2009; Lareau, 1987; Maddaus, 1990; Witte & Thorn, 1996).

In a review of the literature on social perspectives on school choice, Berends and Zottola (2009) summarized the impact of social networks on information about school choice. Judgments of school quality originate in social networks, and while this information is primarily opinion based, it is still used more than tangible evidence about a school's curricula or instructional methodology. Whether a school is good or bad is determined by how many high status parents think it is so. Though all parents utilize

their social networks to make choice decisions, middle and upper-class parents have access to broader networks that include more professionals and education experts (Berends & Zottola, 2009).

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, as well as having more education and higher incomes than non-choosing parents (Goldhaber, 1999; Martinez et al., 1994). This body of research indicates white, well educated, middle-class parents are more likely to seek out school choice options for their children and have a wider range of available options to choose from (Goldhaber, 1999; Maddaus, 1990).

Other concerns include whether parents will choose schools for primarily academic quality reasons or primarily demographic and convenience reasons (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). According to market theorists, parents choosing for academic quality reasons will drive improvement of the schools (Chung-Kai & Chia-Hung, 2009; Maddaus, 1990), and parents choosing for demographic or convenience reasons will have no real impact on the academic quality of schools, instead leading to increased segregation (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Maddaus, 1990; Martinez et al., 1994; Schneider et al., 1998).

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, Weiher, Tedin, and Matland,

(2000) noted that parents chose for better educational quality, smaller class sizes, and safety. Both studies indicated ease of transportation was an important consideration for parents, especially for those who are least likely to have resources to support daily transportation to a distant school (Kleitz et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000).

In summary, some studies show parents choose schools for academic reasons (Cox & Witko, 2008; Kleitz et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Martinez et al., 1994; Witte & Thorn, 1996), while others indicate parents choose based on demographics or location (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Goldhaber, 1999; Schneider et al., 1998; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). However, this may be a false dichotomy, because while these studies asked parents to rank order or select potential reasons for selecting schools, the high percentages for all choices seem to indicate that parents factor in many reasons and characteristics when making school choice decisions, reasons spread along continuums of both academics and personal/convenience (Maddaus, 1990).

Enrollment Decisions and Demographics

While some self-report survey studies show distinct differences among reasons for choices along race and class lines (Goldhaber, 1999; Schneider et al., 1998), other studies show few differences (Garcia, 2008; Kleitz et al., 2000). To address the concern of self-report bias, Weiher and Tedin (2002) compared self-reports with actual choice decisions, while Garcia (2008) examined choice decisions by comparing demographics of sending districts to demographics of receiving districts. Both of these studies found that the self-reported reasons and the actual choices selected depended on the types of choices available and the academic and demographic characteristics of the schools parents were leaving (Garcia, 2008; Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

When the choices were magnet schools, which have a purpose of desegregation and academic excellence, parents tended to choose for academic quality and values purposes, and the sending schools often had lower indicators of academic performance and lower ethnic diversity (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). When the choices were charter public schools, which often had the highly desirable characteristics of small class size and creative, enthusiastic teachers, Garcia (2008) found the schools tended to have greater ethnic and SES diversity than their sending schools, but lower indicators of academic performance (test scores) than their sending schools (Garcia, 2008; Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

However, in a meta-analysis of the research on the social context of charter public schools, Wells (2009) found that, while charter public schools do enroll a representative sampling of the larger population, individual charter public schools tend to be more segregated along social class and race/ethnic lines than sending schools. Wells (2009) made a distinction between start-up charters and conversion charters, finding that start-up charters tend to enroll higher percentages of children who come from white, middle and upper-income, well educated parents, whereas conversion charter public schools tend to enroll higher percentages of children who come from Black and Latino, lower-income parents with less education. Wells' (2009) findings were supported by Loveless and Field's (2009) literature review of perspectives on school choice:

Charters promote equity by giving disadvantaged families choices that they would not otherwise have, but only the most motivated or informed may be taking advantage of the new options. Charters may foster racial segregation by allowing parents to choose schools with a racial profile matching their own. Like segregation arising from residential patterns, these patterns seem to stem from parents wanting their children to attend a school in close proximity to home. (p. 111)

Thus, conversion charters, which most often arise in high-poverty, high-minority urban neighborhoods, will enroll students from those neighborhoods, while start-up charters, located in a wide variety of facilities, usually don't have a neighborhood to draw from, and pull families from a wide area (Loveless & Field, 2009). As referenced earlier, families with extensive social networks will be more likely to find out about these start-up charters, and more likely to have the time and income available to make enrollment and attendance a realistic option (Loveless & Field, 2009; Wells, 2009).

In conclusion, the demographics of choosing families, as well as the demographic characteristics of chosen schools, were connected to enrollment decisions in the literature reviewed for this study. However, this connection seemed to vary greatly depending on the type of school choice options being studied, which emphasizes the need for further research in this area, especially related to the different types of charter schools.

Parental Involvement

The literature reviewed in the area of parent involvement covered satisfaction with choices, outcomes of parent involvement for school and student success, overview of how involvement has changed, and perceptions of schools and schooling, which also intersects with social class demographics. This section begins with family satisfaction with choice because parental involvement is one of the primary factors related to school satisfaction.

Satisfaction of Parents

Parental satisfaction with schooling is tied to school-home communication and parental involvement (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Markow, 2007). When parents felt informed about their children's progress, and felt comfortable approaching the school,

they were more satisfied (Friedman et al., 2007; Griffith, 1997). When parents had many ways to get involved, were welcomed (and expected) to be involved, and when there was a community of like-minded parents in the school, parents were more satisfied (Griffith, 1997). According to Griffith (1997), the permeability of the school organization to parental involvement is a key indicator of parent satisfaction, regardless of the type of school.

Parents of all classes are more satisfied with choice when they are more frequently involved in school activities (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). Hausman and Goldring's (2000) study supported Lareau's (1987) findings: Low income families do not feel welcome at school and are more likely to view education as the teacher's responsibility and less likely to intervene in the child's education program. Families of higher socioeconomic status are more interconnected and view schooling as a shared responsibility (Hausman & Goldring, 2000).

Outcomes of Involvement

Though parents are most satisfied when they are involved in their children's schools, it is unclear whether parent involvement results in any gains for student learning. In a meta-analysis of the empirical studies on parental involvement and student academic success, Fan and Chen (2001) found little agreement on definitions of parental involvement or student academic achievement. However, they did find a positive correlation between parental involvement and student academic achievement, when measured with global measures such as school GPA. The aspect of parental involvement that had the largest impact on student academic achievement was parental expectations of and aspirations for a child's education (Fan & Chen, 2001). In summary, students were

more likely to achieve academically if their parents expected them to achieve and go to college.

In other, more recent studies, parent involvement has been highly correlated with student achievement, and choice is connected to involvement, with parents who select a school for their child being *more* likely to become involved in the school and their children's education (Wohlstetter, Nayfack, and Mora-Flores, 2008). In 2007, Shannon and Bylsma indicated benefits of parent involvement included higher GPAs, enrollment in more challenging classes, better attendance, improved behavior, and better social skills. Education leaders, including Comer (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996), have long advocated the benefits of parental involvement for schools, teachers, and students.

The more active roles parents take at school, the greater the benefit of parental involvement for promoting academic and social change in schools (Bauch and Goldring 1995). Those parents most likely to be involved, and thus have greater impact on the schools, are parents with higher incomes (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). Additionally, parents who choose schools are more empowered to influence the schools to meet their needs as a result of having a voice as well as the potential to exit the school (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). Given the importance of transportation in school choice decisions, access to transportation may be related to parental involvement: those parents with greater access to transportation will be more likely to participate in schools. To better meet the needs of all families, schools need to provide more varied opportunities to participate, especially outside of school/work hours for 2-parent working families (Wohlstetter et al., 2008).

The literature on parental involvement led me to studies of parents' perceptions of schooling, since parents' expectation of their children's educational achievement was related to actual student achievement. This body of research (Gorman, 1998; Rätty, 2003; Rätty, 2007; Rätty, Jaukka & Kasanen, 2004; Rätty & Kasanen, 2007; Schneider et al., 1998) is tied to class differences: when asked to recall their elementary educations, do different parents from different social classes experience school differently? Further, do parents' perceptions of their own schooling influence their perceptions of children's schooling, and expectations of the outcomes of that schooling? In the literature, socio-economic status is often measured by occupation and education attainment, as well as by income levels (Anyon, 1981; Cox & Witko, 2008; Gorman, 1998; Ramsay, Sneddon, Grenfell, & Ford, 1983; Rätty, 2007; Schneider et al., 1998). I found these researchers used the terms working-class, low-SES, and low-education levels synonymously, as they did middle-class, higher-SES, and college-educated. For the purposes of this literature review, I use the terms middle-class and working-class.

Middle-Class and Working-Class Differences

Several studies found that working-class parents were split into two groups: some tended to have more positive recollections of their own schooling, higher expectations of their children's schooling, and more positive perceptions of their children's schools, while others tended to have more negative recollections, lower expectations, and more negative perceptions of their children's schooling experiences (Gorman, 1998; Rätty, 2003; Rätty, 2007). Those working-class parents who had more positive recollections were more likely to participate in their children's education and encourage their children's academic achievement (Gorman, 1998; Rätty, 2003; Rätty, 2007). On the

whole, there was more variability in working-class parents' attitudes about schooling (Gorman, 1998). Middle-class parents, on the other hand, tended to have more positive recollections, higher expectations for their children's education outcomes, and perceived both negative and positive aspects of their children's schooling (Gorman, 1998; Rätty et al., 2004; Rätty & Kasanen, 2007). Middle-class parents tended to be more involved in their children's education at both a school and home level, when compared to working-class parents (Cox & Witko, 2008; Gorman, 1998).

Working-class parents who have not experienced success as an outcome of their schooling and have experienced injustices of class (Gorman, 1998) are less likely to be involved in their children's education (Gorman, 1998; Rätty & Kasanen, 2007), less likely to encourage their children (Gorman, 1998; Rätty, 2003), and less likely to be aware of school choice options (Schneider et al., 1998). Despite dissatisfaction with their child's school, working-class parents are less likely and/or less able to take the opportunity to select a new school (Maddaus, 1990). If schools do not provide working-class children with the tools to succeed economically in society, schools will continue to reproduce the social inequities in our society (Lareau, 1987; Ramsay et al., 1983). At this time, NCLB is attempting to ensure that all children, in all schools, are given the academic tools to succeed (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Whitman, 2008), with school choice options encouraged as a response to schools that do not make this mark.

The current social, economic, and political climate surrounding public education makes understanding the impact of school choice a relevant research topic for this dissertation. The importance of parents as choice makers, and as involved participants in public schools, makes utilizing parents crucial.

Rationale and Purpose

In this review of the literature, I found studies on the relationships between parents' demographics and their school choice decisions (e.g., Martinez et al., 1994; Witte & Thorn, 1996), their satisfaction with choice outcomes (e.g., Griffith, 1997; Schneider et al., 1998), and their levels of parental involvement after choices have been made (e.g., Cox & Witko, 2008; Fan & Chen, 2001). I also found studies comparing the education experiences of parents from different class backgrounds and any relationships between their experiences and their attitudes toward and expectations of their children's schooling (e.g., Gorman, 1998; Rätty, 2007). However, I found no studies that examined the connections between parents' experiences in elementary education, their demographics, and their school choice decisions. To investigate these connections and test the waters for potential research, I designed a pilot study, as described in the first section of Chapter Three. The purpose of this dissertation emerged from that pilot study: to investigate the perceptions of school choice held by parents who chose to enroll children in a particular school choice context. Conversations with participants began with these questions (see Interview Protocol, Appendix A):

- What are parents' recollections of their elementary schooling experiences?
- How do parents' experiences compare to their child/ren's experiences?
- Have parents' experiences at this public charter school influenced their perceptions of a 'good' public elementary education?
- How can a shared construction of school choice, from these parents' perceptions, inform school choice theory?

The development of this study is described in detail in the Chapter Three:
Research Design and Methods.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Theoretical and Methodological Grounding

Pilot Study

During a pilot study, conducted during February and March of 2010, I tested the research methods, interview protocol, and demographic survey, and interviewed five parents from a specific school choice context (described in following sections). (See Appendix B for more information on instrument revisions made as a result of the Pilot Study.) Coding and analysis of these interviews revealed the following potential themes:

- Socio-economic status/Class values
- Transferability of school's philosophy and design to regular school settings
- Parental involvement
- Reasons for choice
- Equity and access to school choice (barriers)
- Perceptions of "outsiders" vs. "insiders" to this context
- School choice as a mechanism for school improvement

During this dissertation, I used the themes that emerged during the pilot study as a starting point for constant comparison (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) during successive data collection with 28 more participants from the same context (see following sections on data analysis).

Another outcome of the literature review and pilot study was the need for a research paradigm that would support emergent-grounded theory. According to Henig (1994), positivist research designs have failed to reveal traditional generalizable “truths” in the many issues surrounding school choice. In addition, the complexity of truths within each social context makes designing a strong traditional research study extremely problematic (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I experienced this first hand during the pilot study, as each interview revealed themes and perspectives on choice, which were then expanded on and/or challenged during successive interviews. The use of a reflexive journal and regular memos was necessary to keep track of these expansions and contradistinctions. Thus, for this study, I selected a naturalistic-constructivist research design using emergent-grounded theory, as described in the next sections.

Naturalistic-Constructivist Research Paradigm

Based on the literature review and the questions this study sought to investigate, I situated this study within the naturalistic-constructivist research paradigm, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), rather than the traditional positivist research paradigm. Instead of using qualitative methods to research a positivist question with hypotheses, I used qualitative methods to research a naturalistic-constructivist question with open-ended expectations.

With this study, I attempted to reveal the mosaic of reality these parents inhabited, and tried to tap into the truths they could share, in order to inform others of this context of school choice and the potential themes and hypotheses that could be investigated in other contexts. I did not set out to reveal the one truth about school choice, or the “right” understanding about school choice.

Selecting a naturalistic-constructivist paradigm necessitated a different research design, which I explain in detail throughout this methods section. Components of this research design include creating rich descriptions and detailed shared constructs of reality, which allow readers to judge the transferability of this study's findings to their social contexts (Erlandson et al., 1993). I am not seeking to prove the generalizability of this study's findings to other contexts.

Emergent-Grounded Theory

In naturalistic-constructivist inquiry, emergent-grounded theory is used to derive theories from the data. As a result, theories evolve a posteriori, during the process, instead of a priori, or before research begins (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 50). Emergent-grounded theory is the best method for encompassing the multiple realities encountered in naturalistic-constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Glasser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparison method is used to analyze data throughout the data collection process, in order to ground theory in the data. The researcher-as-instrument collects data, reflects, analyzes, and returns to collect more data, constantly comparing and reformulating theories based on the data (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Methods Utilized

In this study, I utilized qualitative and quantitative methods. Using both improves triangulation, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson et al., 1993). The use of purposive sampling was based on statistical information about the specific and general contexts of this study. Context statistics, survey data, and residence data all helped describe the context in great detail, and illuminated potential questions and theories during qualitative data collection. Qualitative methods, including interviews,

observations, documents, and researcher-as-instrument, were used to gather the majority of this study's data. A reflexivity journal, memos, member checking, and peer debriefing were tools I used to keep myself as researcher-as-instrument transparent and trustworthy (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). (See later section on Quality Criteria, this chapter, for more elaboration, and Appendix C: Reflexivity/Reflection Summary for outcomes of the reflexivity processes.)

End Product—Case Study

The findings from this study are being reported via a case study format. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend a case study format for reporting results of naturalistic-constructivist studies. According to Erlandson et al. (1993), a case study report “involves an investigator who makes a detailed examination of a single subject, group, or phenomenon” (p. 163). The case study format allows for the communication of the complex mosaic of realities inhabiting this school choice context. Therefore, the final report for this study—this dissertation—describes how new parents at this charter public school perceived school choice and the issues that arose *within* this context through the process of creating a shared construct with members *of* this context.

Description of Setting

Context

This study is situated in a particular context of school choice: a charter public school that served 317 students in grades K-8, hereafter known as “Northern.” Because the number of families interested in attending Northern exceeds the number of available slots, families enroll children through a random lottery system, as required by state law. As indicated by both pilot study participants and a school administrator, enrollment is

generated primarily through word of mouth. Northern has a progressive, constructivist, community-focused curriculum, and has a reputation for high academic performance and high parental involvement (Liam, 4-3, Ginger, 2-4). (Throughout this paper, all people and place names are identified with pseudonyms. The parenthetical numeric codes after participant pseudonyms refer to the interview # and page # where the quote or reference can be found. Interviews are numbered in the order they were conducted, thus #1-5 indicate the pilot study interviews.) According to the school's web site and the school's education director, Northern has been recognized at national, regional, state, and local levels for pedagogical innovation and academic excellence. For example, their community-based curriculum, in which students engage in learning activities outside of their classroom environment that are tied to character goals and learning goals within the school, is recognized nationally as a model for service learning.

In the late 1990s, a group of teachers and community members started this charter public school, utilizing an expeditionary learning model. At the time of this study, many of those founding teachers and community members remained connected to Northern, and the school had a reputation for staying true to its founding philosophies and goals (Surie, 3-7; Marney, 1-7). In addition, the school has had a very low turnover rate for families, with many founding families still in attendance ten years out. Parent and community involvement has remained high, as indicated by the school's recent purchase of a building. Ten years of capital campaign and community grants provided the funds to purchase this building, which allowed Northern to grow by 100 students for the 2009-2010 school year. However, once the building was purchased, a summer of work was necessary to make the site ready for students and teachers by the last week of August.

The outpouring of time and resources contributed by staff, parents, students, alumni, and community members, including local trade unions, showed the support this school engendered.

The choice of Northern as a context for this study is tied to its growth during the 2009-2010 school year, which provided a singular opportunity for accessing the perceptions of a large number of parents during their first year at the school. By asking parents from these newly enrolled families about their recent school choice decisions, I hoped to access more accurate perspectives on school choice decisions, less tempered by being a long-standing family at this charter school for several years or more. Additionally, rather than sample parents from a wide variety of school choice options, I chose to sample a large group of parents who had chosen this particular school of choice in order to portray the rich mosaic of perceptions existing within a single context.

Purposive Sampling

Initial selection of participants for this study used purposive sampling, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 199-202), with the following adjustments. Eligible families had to have children enrolled in grades 2-6, to not only ensure that they had another school to reference for comparison, but to also ensure they had not chosen Northern primarily as an option to attending a regular public Junior High. I felt that the reasons for selecting a school choice option for Junior High might be different than the reasons for selecting a school choice option for elementary school, a perception stemming from my own experiences in public schools of choice at the elementary and Junior High levels, as well as the literature review conducted for this study.

At the end of each interview, as part of purposive sampling, I asked participants for the name of anyone new to Northern who might be able to add to our shared construct of school choice issues (Erlandson et al., 1993). Four families who had not responded to earlier invitations were contacted and invited to participate as a result of this purposive sampling technique, using the recruitment script (Appendix D). Three of the recommended families responded positively to my invitation in combination with another parent's recommendation, and participated in the study.

During the literature review and the pilot study for this dissertation, a potential theme of social class, parent perceptions, and equity/access to school choice emerged. A school's Free and Reduced Lunch (F&R Lunch) percentage is a statistic commonly used as an indicator of socio-economic status in schools. Within the district context, 44% of families qualified for F&R Lunch during the 2009-2010 school year, while at Northern, 13% of the families qualified for F&R Lunch. Within the potential sampling of 56 families, six qualified for F&R Lunch, and two families out of the 29 who agreed to participate qualified for F&R Lunch. Therefore, though socio-economic status and social class emerged as a consistent theme throughout the interviews as well as the literature review, I did not interview enough families who came from lower socio-economic status or outside of the middle-class/upper-middle-class social networks to adequately represent their portion of the mosaic of school choice realities within this context.

In light of the limited socio-economic demographics in this sample, I considered opening up the study to other groups of parents, such as those who only had Junior High students, or parents at other schools of choice. In the end, I decided to stick with this purposive sampling because it represents the reality of school choice within this context.

By giving a thorough and accurate description of these participants in this context, I will enable readers and researchers to judge whether the findings from this study apply to their contexts, and hopefully encourage the expansion of this research into other contexts with greater diversity of social class status.

Participants

Participants in this study were parents who enrolled children for the first time at Northern, in grades 2-6, during the 2009-2010 school year. These criteria yielded a potential sampling of 56 families. I spoke with the gatekeeper—the school’s education director/principal—to gain permission to conduct this study and access parent data. I mailed each eligible family an introductory letter and a SASE to return the research participant form located at the bottom of the introductory letter (Appendix E). I followed up with an email four weeks later, one for those who had responded (Appendix F) and one for those who had not responded (Appendix G). In the end, 33 parents, representing 29 families, agreed to participate in this study. Only a few changes were made to the interview protocol and demographic survey used for the pilot study. Thus, data gathered during the pilot study was incorporated into data for the full dissertation. (See Appendix B for information about instrument revisions resulting from the pilot study.)

Data Collection

Data Collection Procedures

Parents who agreed to participate in this study were contacted by email and/or phone to set up an interview, as per their preference. Interviews were scheduled at times and places convenient to the parents, and included coffee shops, homes, and workplaces.

At the beginning of the interviews, we first went over the informed consent documentation, in which I gained permission to record the interview and use quotes under pseudonym in the final report. This process took five to ten minutes. Next, we went through the demographic survey (Appendix H). The survey provided an opportunity to break the ice on the topics of the interview and primed the participants' memories for relevant information. Completing the survey took about five minutes. After the survey, we began the interview with the first question, "To start out with, I'd like to hear about your own experiences in elementary school." This opening question led to many of the subsequent questions, and served as a referent that participants and I went back to, throughout the interviews (see Interview Protocol, Appendix A). The interviews took from 30-50 minutes. The interview protocol included questions reflecting back to emergent themes gleaned from previous interviews, and a question asking for other potential participants who may have differing opinions or additional information. Altogether, it took about an hour to complete the entire process.

At the end of each interview, I thanked participants and kept the door open for potential future contacts for formal member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Within a few days of the interviews, I sent a personal follow-up email or mailed note to each participant, thanking them for their participation and letting them know I would share the final report with them. If the participant requested a hard copy or email copy of the informed consent document, it was included in that email/mail.

After each interview, I wrote a memo, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), and Charmaz (2006) summarizing my thoughts and comparing the emerging themes from each interview with the prior emergent themes. As immediately as possible,

I listened to each interview, and jotted notes about emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006; Erlandson et al., 1993). These notes I compared with previous notes and then updated my reflexivity notes to reflect those comparisons. The resulting mosaics of shared constructs were then submitted to the next participant(s) for member checking and further revision (Erlandson et al., 1993). This cycle continued until the data collection process was complete, when new interviews failed to reveal new themes or nuances (Charmaz, 2006). All notes and documentation were kept in a secure location, well organized, to facilitate the external audit at the end of the study. (See the later section on audit trail in this chapter.)

Instruments

The instruments used in this study were tested and refined through an earlier pilot study with participants from this school context. The main instruments were a demographic survey using 16 questions (Appendix H), and a semi-structured interview with nine questions (Appendix A). All of these instruments were in turn used by the researcher-as-instrument.

The survey had open and closed-ended questions. The primarily demographic questions, such as income and highest education level, helped describe the context and participants in detail. Other questions helped prepare participants for interview questions, such as the set of survey questions asking participants to compare their own elementary education experiences to their children's experiences.

The semi-structured interview contained nine guiding questions (Appendix A). These questions were addressed in no particular order, and some were answered in the course of answering other questions. Having them listed in the interview protocol helped

me keep focused on the purpose of the interviews, and helped me guide participants back to relevant content when necessary. My intention was to reveal individual constructions of realities of school choice, within this context, leading toward building shared constructs among the group of participants (Charmaz, 2006; Erlandson et al., 1993). The questions were developed during the literature review, and refined in the pilot study with five participants. I viewed this protocol as a living document that evolved throughout the interviews, which reflects the interactive nature of data collection and analysis in a naturalistic-constructivist inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993).

In addition to the above data, I collected school and district data from websites to facilitate comparison of the schools, as well as identify potential themes. The literature called for comparing the demographics of schools of choice with the demographics of individual sending schools, not the whole district, in order to gain a more accurate perception of the changes in each child's learning situation (Garcia, 2008). To determine the relative diversity of representation throughout the city, I plotted participants' addresses on a local map to gain a visual of the geographic context of this study and the relative dispersal of families throughout the city (see Figure 5.1).

Finally, all of these data sources were viewed, interpreted, and analyzed through myself, the researcher-as-instrument. According to Erlandson et al. (1993),

The human instrument allows data to be collected and analyzed in an interactive process.... As soon as data are obtained, tentative meaning is applied to them. When new data are obtained, meaning is revised. (p. 39)

A reflexivity journal, audit trail, memos, member-checks, peer-debriefing, triangulation, and researcher adviser checks were tools I used as a researcher-as-instrument to ensure

that the process of data collection/analysis remained focused and trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). (These tools are detailed in later sections within this chapter.)

Analysis

Unlike traditional positivist research, where the bulk of analysis occurs after data collection, in naturalistic-constructivist inquiry, much of the analysis occurs during and in-between data collection periods because one of the primary instruments for data collection is the researcher-as-instrument, as described more fully in a later section in this chapter (Erlandson et al., 1993). Thus, the analysis of interviews, observations, documentation, situation-specific statistics, survey data, and residence data occurred during and after data collection. The end goal was to build a shared construction of the realities surrounding school choice, in this context, for these parents.

For this study, interviews were analyzed using the following procedures: memos written after each interview (Charmaz, 2006), line-by-line coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), constant-comparison of the emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006), and revision/refinement of the emerging construct(s) of reality with other members of the context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). Informal member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), formal peer-debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and my reflexivity journal (Erlandson et al., 1993) helped me monitor the analysis procedure to make sure findings were accurate for members of this context. For example, during interviews, I shared emerging themes, and asked participants for their thoughts, additions, and contradictions, as well as recommendations for others who might have a different perspective or who could inform this perspective. These responses were incorporated into the emerging themes, which were then shared with the next participant, as part of the

hermeneutic-dialect between context, researcher, and participants (Erlandson et al., 1993).

As a result, throughout this emergent-grounded theory study, themes, theories, and hypotheses emerged in a constant dialectic cycling between data collection, analysis, member checking, and still more data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Erlandson et al., 1993). To ensure transparency of analysis for others, the researcher must keep a clear and accurate record of the simultaneous data collection and analysis processes and products. (See the audit trail section in this chapter.)

The descriptive statistical data collected on participants and schools helped create a rich, thick description of this school choice context, helped illustrate and illuminate emerging themes, pointed to possible hypotheses to test and share with participants, and provided alternate explanations that needed to be explored with further data collection. (See Appendix I, Table I.1: Raw Data from Demographic Survey.)

Quality Criteria for Trustworthiness

Valid inquiry...must demonstrate its truth value, provide the basis for applying it, and allow for external judgments to be made about the consistency of its procedures and the neutrality of its findings (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 29).

The qualities listed above by Erlandson et al. (1993) combine to form a study's measure of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and are critical features of naturalistic-constructivist inquiry. How this study addressed the criteria for trustworthiness, as measured by credibility (truth value), transferability (application), dependability (consistency), and confirmability (neutrality), is explained in the following sections.

Credibility

In traditional positivist research, internal validity is the measure of truth represented by a study (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 29). For naturalistic-constructivist research, credibility is the measure of truth: i.e., does the description of the realities of this setting, developed via inquiry, ring true for the members of this setting—both those who contributed to the construction as well as those who did not (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 29). A credible study must measure true on points of shared or convergent reality, as well as points where realities differ or diverge (Erlandson et al., 1993). This study used the following research design components to contribute to credibility: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, referential adequacy materials, peer debriefing, and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). These components also weave support into other measures of the strength of this study, including confirmability, transferability, and dependability, as described in later sections.

Prolonged engagement seeks redundancy and depth of data (Erlandson et al., 1993). I interviewed participants until no new additions or alterations to the shared construct emerged, and no new divergent views emerged. Persistent observation was met through the constant comparison of new data with old, active pursuit of different interpretations, and getting below the surface of initial comments. During interviews, I asked participants to recommend others I should speak with in order to access different views.

Triangulation, especially important for confirmability of data as measured in the audit trail (next section), means the use of different sources, questions, opinions, methods, and explanations/hypotheses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). For this study,

constant questioning of whether interpretations are true for this context and these participants necessitated finding multiple pieces of evidence to support themes, theories, and hypotheses.

Referential adequacy materials are part of the thick, rich description of the context (Erlandson et al., 1993) necessary for transferability (see following section). I spent a year in the school context, where I observed the sensory reality and day-to-day operations of the individuals who interacted with parents/guardians. These observation notes were combined with information gained from documents accessible to or provided to families, in order to describe the information available to potential choosers of this school.

Peer-debriefing was used to support credibility by having peers—professionals outside of the context but within the larger context of school choice—analyze materials, test emerging themes, theories, and hypotheses, and listen to my ideas and concerns (Erlandson et al., 1993). In-person peer-debriefing sessions, with three different peers, were dialogic in nature, and fed into the reflexivity journal. I took notes during these sessions to aid with the audit trail. Additional peer-debriefing took place via email when I sent memos to peers, who then responded with questions, feedback, and connections to their own experiences with school choice. Peer-debriefing occurred at intervals during the interviewing process, and during the analysis and writing phases.

Member checking is when the researcher shares his or her interpretation of what participants have said, verifying perceived realities with those whose perceptions contributed to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, member checking occurred at three points. First, I verified that what I heard was what participants meant to say, using clarifying comments during interviews. Additionally, I shared emerging

constructs with participants and dialogued with them about their perceptions and reflections during interviews (Charmaz, 2006). The third form of member checking occurred when I shared the “rough but final” shared constructs/divergent constructs with members of the context to verify that their perspective was represented before writing the conclusions and recommendations sections.

Transferability

Another component of the overall trustworthiness of research is the transferability of its findings to other contexts or other participants (Erlandson et al., 1993). In positivist research, this is called generalizability. Transferability of naturalistic-constructivist research is facilitated through purposive sampling (described in an earlier section in this chapter) and thick description. Thick description improves transferability when the researcher collects sufficiently detailed descriptions of data in context and reports them with sufficient detail and precision to allow judgments about transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I have used thick description in the findings chapters by layering participants’ words to reveal themes as they emerged during the research process.

Dependability and Confirmability

In traditional research, trustworthiness is called validity, and is measured by reliability, replicability, and objectivity. In naturalistic-constructivist research, the criteria for trustworthiness are partially met through the dependability of the study’s processes and confirmability of the study’s products (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is measured by the clarity and truth of the processes used in the study and confirmability is measured by how well the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations are supported by the inquiry and whether they can be traced back

to their sources. Both dependability and confirmability are measured and checked through audit trails.

As explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and expanded upon by Erlandson et al. (1993), there are six categories of information a researcher should collect/keep to facilitate a thorough external audit trail: raw data, data reduction/analysis products, data reconstruction/synthesis products, process notes, intentions/dispositions, and instrument development. For raw data, I collected audiotapes, typed transcripts, completed surveys, statistical data on schools/districts, and observation notes. Data reduction/analysis products included memos for each interview, photographs of my research board, peer-debriefing notes, member checking notes, and research adviser conference notes, as well as emails with research committee members. The file for data reconstruction/synthesis includes notes and memos on grounded-theory development, coded observations/transcripts, coded note-cards, and summary/interim reports. To keep track of the research process, I kept a reflexivity journal. My intentions and dispositions are best reflected in the pilot study for this project, the research proposal and proposal defense presentation, IRB application, reflexivity journal, and peer/research adviser debriefing notes. Finally, development of instruments was documented in the pilot study report, the dissertation proposal, and the IRB application.

In summary, by preparing for a thorough external audit of the research processes and products, I sought to “report no ‘fact’ without noting source... [and] make no assertion without supporting data” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 150). For this study, I personally conducted an audit after the final draft of the case study was written, but

before final approval of the dissertation by my committee. Evidence of this audit is available upon request.

Reflexivity

The researcher-as-instrument is the primary data collection instrument of excellent naturalistic-constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A critical tool for ensuring the quality of the researcher-as-instrument is a reflexivity journal in which the researcher records his or her thoughts, questions, insights, and struggles (Kleinsasser, 1991). This journal supports the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of this research, and allows for a thorough audit verifying the same, as explained above (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the reflexive journal as being a diary of the researcher-as-instrument. In my reflexive journal, I kept track of the research schedule, logistics, insights, and reasons for my methodological decisions. During the intense data collection phase, I made daily entries, and then weekly or bi-weekly entries throughout the remainder of the study. Through my reflexivity journal, I intended to use my reflexivity to understand my subjectivity, thus focusing myself as research instrument on what I actually saw and heard, not what I interpreted or selected (Peshkin, 1998). The shared constructions and mosaics of reality resulting from this study should be just that: shared. I am the instrument through which they were shared. (See Appendix C: Reflexivity/Reflection Summary.)

Benefits, Limitations, and Ethics

All research in education must attend to the outcomes, limitations, and ethical issues inherent in working with human subjects in social contexts. When conducting

research within the naturalistic-constructivist paradigm, using emergent-grounded theory, researchers have additional responsibility for sharing the results in ethical ways that adequately communicate both the limitations of the findings as well as the benefit and potential uses of the findings in order to circumvent readers' often automatic interpretation of research through a positivist paradigm lens.

Benefits and Potential Outcomes

This study can lead to many positive outcomes. For participants of naturalistic-constructivist inquiry, the creation of grounded theory gives increased knowledge and understanding of school choice issues to participants. Hermeneutic-dialect means the researcher is engaged with participants in constructing meaning. Rather than just listening to what participants have to say, collecting the data, and analyzing later, the researcher is continually reflecting the findings back to the participants, building their knowledge while they in turn inform the study (Charmaz, 2006; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This empowerment of participants as active members of the research is one of the features that drew me to this research paradigm.

Members of this situated context who have not participated in the actual research project, including administrators, teachers, and parents, can benefit from increased understandings of the underlying issues involved in this local school choice context. In addition, my degree-granting university houses a statewide center for school improvement and a doctoral program with an emphasis on school improvement. Uncovering parents' perceived realities of school choice as a vehicle for school improvement can be beneficial to these members of the larger context of this study.

Researchers and theorists in areas of school choice and school improvement will also benefit from having this rich description of one school choice context. The potential theories, hypotheses, and questions generated by this study can inform future inquiry in other contexts. In addition, the results of this study may give voice to current theories, challenge current theories, or lead to the construction of new theories.

Finally, with the deeply political nature of school choice, those involved in politics may benefit from seeing an inside perspective on how school choice operates for those on the front lines of school choice decisions: the parents themselves.

Limitations and Transferability

In the traditional, positivist-research paradigm, limitations often relate to the generalizability of the findings to other situations, and the responsibility for proving generalizability rests with the researcher. In contrast, within the naturalistic-constructivist research paradigm, limitations still relate to generalizability, but the term used is transferability, and the responsibility for determining transferability lies with the reader/researcher (Erlandson et al., 1993). As the researcher, I must describe the context and participants with such rich detail and with such a clear audit trail that readers will be able to judge the applicability of these findings to their unique settings. The case study format should ensure that other researchers could judge the usefulness of the theories and hypotheses generated by this study, thus informing their own work.

The findings of this study are limited to this particular school, situated within this larger school choice context, at this moment in time, as viewed through my researcher lens and as negotiated with these participants.

Ethics and Issues

Protecting the anonymity of research participants is one of the more important ethical issues with this study. Using pseudonyms for all place names and participants throughout this report is a first step. Additionally, when disclosure of an individual's demographics, such as ethnicity or family structure, could reveal identity, the information is not shared. However, given the larger contexts of the local region and state, most insiders to this context will have no trouble identifying the school setting used as a source for participants in this study. The research design can help with this ethical dilemma. In building a shared construct of the reality of school choice in this context, the findings do not belong or reflect back onto any single participant. The findings are a mosaic, agreed upon by members with differing constructs of reality. Though readers with insider knowledge of this region and context may recognize this particular setting, the case study report should provide protection of individual identities.

A potentially volatile issue inherent with this study is the political nature of school choice. Part of the relevance and importance of this study is its timeliness with current educational concerns and with the use of school choice by politicians as a means for addressing school improvement. With the initial five interviews from the pilot study, themes emerged about equity of access to school choice and whether this school's model could work in the context of a regular public school. These concerns directed me in my pilot study report to discuss and question the use of charter public schools as a method for improving public schools in general, but initial readers tended to interpret the findings as being critical of this particular school choice context.

To address this potential ethical concern of interpretation and use of this study's findings, I intend the conclusions of this report to be reflective of school choice issues in general. Researchers cannot control how their research is used, but I do not want to lead readers to faulty conclusions. The use of member-checking throughout the interviewing process to build shared consensus, peer-debriefing with colleagues familiar with school choice issues, and conferring with my research adviser to check for unintended foci or bias in this final dissertation helped with this task. After the final draft of the final case study was finished, I shared the draft with several members of this particular context to get their feedback on the focus of the study and how insiders might interpret it, and made adjustments as warranted.

In the next three chapters, I outline the findings from this study. Chapter Four first addresses descriptive statistics of this setting and participants, and then focuses on parents' perceptions of who chooses and what motivates and influences those choices. Chapter Five examines parents' perspectives on parental involvement and parents' decisions in relation to the theory of voice/exit and public/private goals of education. Chapter Six shares parents' perspectives on school choice as a mechanism for school improvement, including utilizing parental involvement as an untapped resource for school improvement. Finally, Chapter Seven connects these findings to the literature, builds a theory about how parental involvement intersects with school choice, and explicates how policy makers and school leaders may be able to capitalize on parental involvement to drive school improvement.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS—WHO CHOOSES AND WHY?

The purpose of this study was to examine the multiple perspectives on the issues surrounding school choice decisions, public schooling, and school improvement, as held by parents participating in this particular school choice context. Politicians, education policy makers, and school leaders regularly use school choice as a recommendation for school improvement that utilizes market forces. However, critics of school choice are concerned about equity of access to choice, the impact of choice on schools that are not chosen, and the quality of education children access in regular public schools. For this study, I spoke with 33 parents who enrolled children in second through sixth grades at a pedagogically progressive charter school, Northern, during the 2009-2010 school year. The first part of this chapter describes the demographics found in this school choice context, and the second part narrates the first theme, Who Chooses and Why?

Demographics and Diversity

Participant Demographics

A total of 33 parents, representing 29 families, participated in this study. Therefore, the baseline for descriptive statistics pertaining to families is 29, while the baseline for descriptive statistics pertaining to individual parents is 33. For example, 24 parents were female, and 9 were male, for a total of 33 parents, while married parents headed 24 families, divorced/separated parents headed three, and single parents headed two, for a total of 29 families. (For raw data from the demographic survey, see Appendix I.) The sample of parents had more participants over 40 years of age (22) than under 40

years of age (11). College graduates headed all but three families, and 13 families had at least one parent with an advanced degree. Furthermore, all families in this study wanted their children to have an education that included college.

The families in this study tended to be middle class or above, with 17 families earning more than \$60,000 a year. According to qualifying criteria for the federal government's Free and Reduced Lunch program (F&R Lunch), using family size and income range, two families qualified for F&R Lunch. Most families in this study had parents with occupations in professional sectors requiring college educations (See Table 4.1), and 23 families had either one parent who stayed home or one parent who had a flexible work schedule. For six families, all parents living in the home were working full-time, traditional schedules.

Table 4.1 Occupations of Parents in Home

Occupation	Number of Parents
Education	11
Contractor	2
Business/Management	9
Art/Design	3
Legal	2
Healthcare	6
Technical/Computer	6
Sciences	6
Homemaker	6

Note: Total number does not include every parent in every family because the pilot study demographic survey did not ask for all household parents' occupations.

Of the 33 interviewed parents, most were themselves educated in general education classrooms, and of the 29 families, 15 received *only* general education services

for their children (See Table 4.2). As children, five parents received Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) services and two received Special Education (SpEd) services, while eight families had children who qualified for GATE services and nine had children who qualified for SpEd services (See Table 4.3). Comparing types of schools, most parents in this study attended regular public schools as children, while sixteen families had sent their children to only regular public schools (See Table 8). Of the 17 families with children enrolled at public schools, seven transferred children to Northern from schools slated for improvement under NCLB.

Table 4.2 Comparison of Parents' and Children's Education Placement

Received Only General Education Services		Received GATE Services		Received SpEd Services	
Parents	Children	Parents	Children	Parents	Children
26	15	5	8	2	9

*Note: Three families had children receiving SpEd services **and** children receiving GATE services, thus total counts of children equal 32, not 29.*

Table 4.3 Comparison of Types of Schools Parents and Children Attended

Regular Public Schools		Private Schools		Charter Public School	Home School	Combination of Schools	
Parents	Children	Parents	Children	Children	Children	Parents	Children
27	16	2	6	1	1	4	5

Note: No parents were home schooled or attended charter public schools as children.

Parents' Own Elementary Education Experiences

In order to provide a basis for comparison with their children's schooling, I asked study participants to reflect on their own elementary experiences. When asked to talk

about their own schooling experiences, some terms or phrases were repeated. Seven parents mentioned bullying as an issue. Ten parents used phrases to indicate school was easy: “I got by”; “I breezed through”; “I wasn’t challenged”; “I was a middle of the road student.” Three parents indicated they hated or never liked school, two who had received SpEd services, while eleven parents said they loved school, enjoyed school, or really liked school. Six parents talked about enjoying education experiences that were outside of the norm, including special classes, experiments in pedagogy, campus schools, and individualized instructional modules.

Eight parents described themselves with phrases like “being compliant”; “good memorizer”; “able to control self”; and “good student.” Three parents experienced poverty and/or inner city violence during their childhoods. Seven parents mentioned having good teachers, the value of having good teachers, and/or memories of specific things good teachers did. Four parents mentioned being bored by the time Jr. High rolled around, and two parents talked about fitting the mold that school was designed for. Four mentioned the social aspects of school were the draw for them, and three parents perceived they were diverse learners who needed something other than the traditional model.

Community Diversity

Ethnic/racial diversity in this northwestern city is low. In 2006, 92% of the city’s residents were white, and 92% spoke English as their primary language, however social class diversity is high, as indicated by the spread of income levels for the city, and the average household income in 2006 was \$71,790 (median income was \$53,539) (City Data, 2010). In 2000, 91% of adults over 25 years of age had earned high school

diplomas and 33.6% had earned bachelor's degrees or higher (U.S. Census, 2006). This school is located in an incorporated area adjoining the city, with its own mayor and city council. Population demographics for this area show small differences in diversity as compared to the city: slightly more ethnically diverse, lower education levels, lower income averages, and higher poverty levels (U.S. Census, 2006).

Among study participants, 26 families had parents who were of European-American descent (identification of ethnicities other than European-American are withheld to protect anonymity due to area demographics). Two families identified themselves as bi-racial, two families were bi-lingual, two families had adopted children who were not born in the U.S., and two families had parents who were born in another country with European-colonial history.

To evaluate the dispersal of families throughout the larger community, I plotted families' home addresses on a map, with lines running from homes to Northern's location, and then removed the map, leaving the plot lines (see Figure 5.1). The resulting starburst figure shows that families are spread out fairly evenly, in a donut-like shape, with few families living near Northern's location and most families living further out in the city and surrounding neighborhoods. Northern is located along a large river, and the river splits the city into two fairly equal sized portions. For comparison purposes, I used the river as a dividing line. An equal number of families come from the northeastern side of the river, compared to the southwestern side of the river. In comparing the eligible parents who agreed to participate in the study, and the eligible parents who did not participate, an equal number of parents from each side of the river declined to participate. Therefore, in direct contrast with the perceptions expressed by over half of the

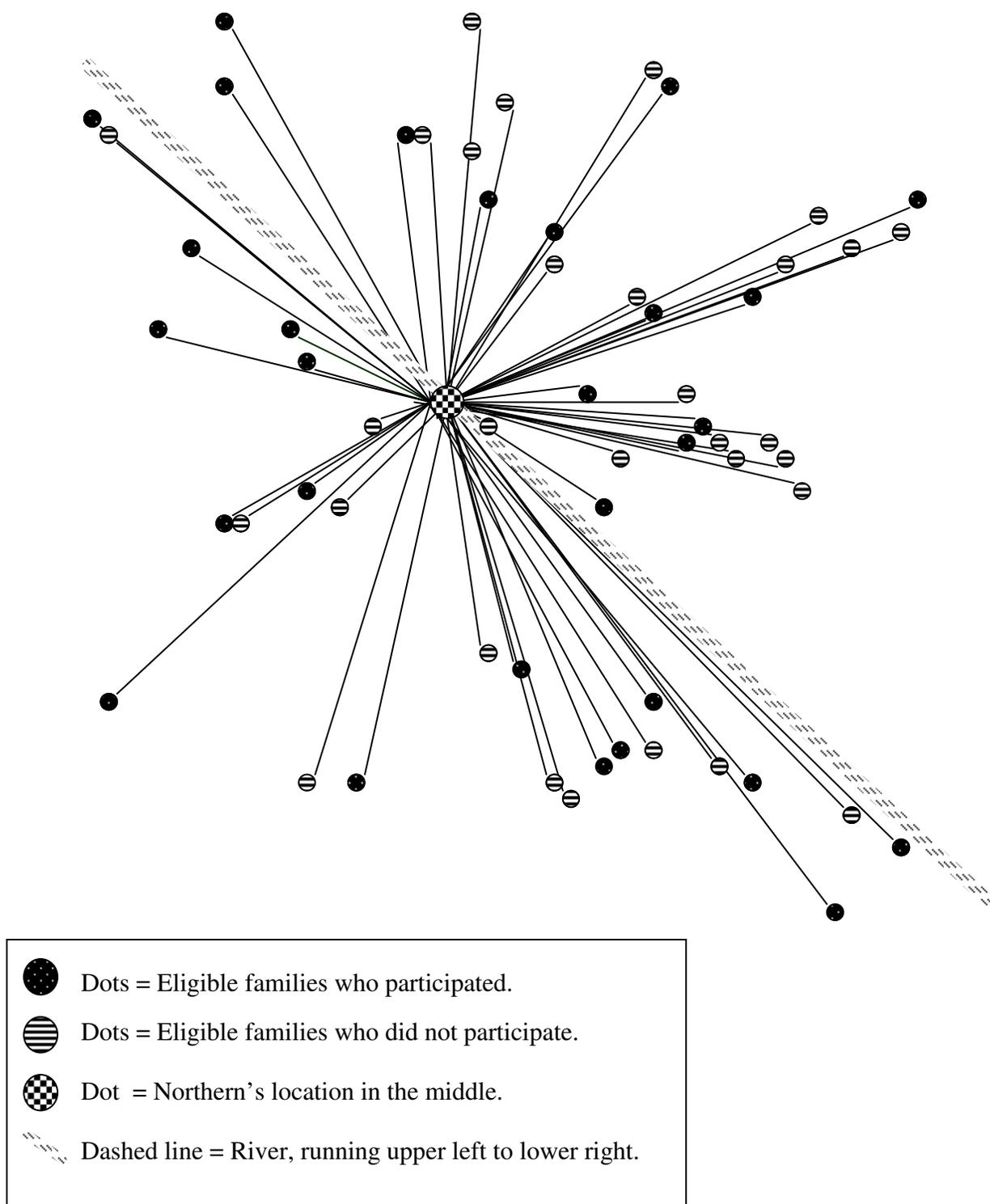


Figure 5.1 Starburst Plot of Eligible Families

participants, as well as all of the local peer reviewers, the majority of families who joined Northern for the first time during the year of this study were *not* coming from the northeastern side of the river.

School Demographics

Within the city and surrounding communities, many school choice options exist, including open enrollment, regular public, charter public, private, and home school. Because of the city district's open enrollment policy, all neighborhood public schools were potentially schools of choice, and students who attended neighborhood schools were not necessarily from the school's residence area. Thus the term "regular public schools" was used to reference this district's neighborhood schools. The school options utilized by parents in this study, during the year prior to enrollment of children at Northern, are displayed in Table 4.4.

Diversity of schools was examined by comparing Northern's demographics to the demographics of sending schools, in the areas of percentage of F&R Lunch, SpEd, GATE, and English Language Learner (ELL) students (See Table 4.5). Thirteen sending schools had more diversity than Northern, while three sending schools had less diversity, as measured by having demographics in at least three of the four categories that were higher or lower (at least one percentage point more or less different) than Northern's. In total, four of the 17 families attending public schools came from sending schools with similar or less diversity than Northern.

I compared regular public schools in the city's school district (City District) with Northern by looking at the schools that families came from in order to compare the demographics of sending and receiving schools. Northern has a higher percentage of

ELL students than two sending schools (Table 4.5 and Table J.1 in Appendix J). The District's average of 7.5% ELL is higher than Northern's 0.3%. Regarding F&R Lunch, Northern's 13.9% is lower than all but 2 of the sending schools (See Table 4.5 and Table J.2 in Appendix J). The school with the highest percentage is Hoover, the elementary

Table 4.4 Prior Schools of Attendance and Number Transferred

School Type & Pseudonym	Enrollment	Transferring to Northern	
		# Students	#Families
City District K-6	24,772	29	20/17
Regular Public			
Michael Kelley	563	2	1
Tartan	330	2	1
Sidewinder	648	2	1
Grover	380	1	1
Glacier	511	2	1
Matterhorn	628	1	1
Willy Shafer	536	1	1
Craters	358	1	1
JFK	322	5	3
Johnson	313	1	1
Quince	327	3	2
Pierce	269	2	1
Red Fir	467	2	1
Grizzly	349	1	1
Charles Moss	565	2	2
Hoover	350	1	1
Charter Public			
Northern	317	--	--
Geyser	436	2	1
Community	143	2	1
Private			
Montessori	75	3	2
Out of State	(K-12) 816	1	1
Hillock	(K-9) 153	8	5
Theresa	327	1	1
Home schooled	2	2	1

Note: Number of families who transferred students to northern from the City District (17) does not match the number of families enrolled in the 16 City District schools that sent students to Northern (20). This is because three families had children at two sending schools, thus adding three to the number of families enrolled when counted by schools.

school that serves the residents living in the same geographic area as Northern's new location.

Table 4.5 Demographics of Previous Public Schools Attended by Participants'

Children

School	% ELL	% Free	% G&T	% SpEd	% ADA	NCLB School Improvement
Pierce	21.2	60.3	6.7	14.1	93.7	No
Red Fir	12.8	37.4	9.4	16.7	94.1	No
Glacier	0.8	48.0	11.5	10.4	94.3	No
Matterhorn	1.0	1.2	3.8	11.6	94.3	No
Geyser	0.2	8.7	1.4	4.6	94.4	No
Grover	5.8	67.0	4.5	10.0	94.6	No
Tartan	0.0	5.7	16.7	3.9	95.0	No
Grizzly	0.3	15.3	9.2	8.0	95.1	No
JFK	2.5	42.8	17.1	9.0	95.3	No
Hoover	16.0	82.9	1.1	11.4	95.6	No
Sidewinder	1.1	21.3	3.7	9.6	95.7	No
Northern	0.3	13.9	6.3	12.9	97.9	No
Michael Kelley	17.2	72.0	1.8	14.7	93.4	Yes
Craters	8.9	62.4	1.4	13.7	94.1	Yes
Willy Shafer	22.9	80.0	1.3	14.0	94.3	Yes
Quince	17.1	79.0	3.1	12.8	94.5	Yes
Johnson	21.1	80.2	0.3	14.4	95.1	Yes
Charles Moss	2.7	40.1	7.8	16.1	95.2	Yes
City District K-6	7.5	45.7	5.5	12.3	94.5	Yes

Note: Geysler Charter was the only other charter public school with complete demographic data profile, thus it is the only non-regular public school, outside of Northern, in the demographic charts. It is useful to compare Geysler with Northern, but Geysler is not included in the regular public school counts for the comparison charts. NCLB School Improvement refers to whether the school is under school improvement, as per NCLB guidelines.

ELL = English Language Learners; Free = Free and Reduced Lunch; G&T = Gifted and Talented Education; SpEd = Special Education; ADA = Average Daily Attendance. Individual tables for each demographic category, sorted from least to greatest, are located in Appendix J.

Northern's GATE population is similar to the District's average, with 16 sending schools having higher percentages of GATE students than Northern (See Table 4.5 and Table J.3 in Appendix J). Incidentally, JFK, the sending school with the highest

percentage of GATE students (17%), sent the most families/students (3/5) of any other sending school. A private school with a similar philosophy to Northern's is the only school to send more families/students (5/8) to Northern. On the opposite spectrum of GATE, Northern's SpEd population is similar to six sending schools and similar to the District average, but seven sending schools had more SpEd students than Northern (See Table 4.5 and Table J.4 in Appendix J).

The District's schools have an average daily attendance (ADA) of 94.5% (See Table 4.5 and Table J.5 in Appendix J). At 97.9%, Northern's ADA was higher than all of the sending schools. JFK, a school participants identified as a highly desirable open enrollment choice school, was in the top three of the sending schools for ADA. In comparison, Hoover, also in the top three for ADA, has the highest F&R Lunch percentage and second to lowest GATE percentage, as well as a reputation for soliciting a high level of parent and community involvement.

In summary, Northern has less diversity than most of the sending public schools, as measured by ELL, SpEd, GATE, and F&R Lunch percentages. Northern attracts proportionately more families with students who have GATE and SpEd needs, but fewer families learning English or families qualifying for F&R Lunch. Parents who choose this charter school tend to be more educated and have higher paying jobs than the averages for both the city and the incorporated area. During their own elementary educations, a greater proportion of parents qualified for GATE than would be expected, and parents may be older than the general public school population of parents of grade 2-6 children. These families represent all neighborhoods in the city, and came from 16 different regular public schools, four different private schools, and two different charter public schools. In

the following sections of this chapter, I explore how these families decided to enroll at Northern and what motivated their choices.

Catalyst for Change and Choice

Becoming Motivated to Leave and/or Choose

The parents in this study all chose to enroll children at Northern instead of their neighborhood public school, but many had sought out choice options before this year (See Table 4.6). For some, regular public schools were their school of choice and they only selected Northern because it presented a better opportunity for their children. For others, regular public schools worked until something about the school changed, like a new principal, or the school became a resource hub for GATE or refugee students. Some parents used the district's open enrollment policy, or moved to new neighborhoods in order to avoid sending their children to their neighborhood school, while some never enrolled their children in public schools at all, opting for private or home schooling, and others attended their neighborhood schools while waiting to win this charter school's lottery or a spot in their chosen open enrollment school.

Table 4.6 Types of Choice Options Participants Previously Accessed for Children

Open Enrollment	School choice NCLB	Private schools	Charter	Home school
6	1	9	2	1

Most parents brought their children to Northern from regular public schools, though nine came from private schools (See Table 4.7). Of the 19 families who brought children to Northern from public schools, six had been accessing schools of choice through open enrollment (See Table 4.8). Regardless of what choice options they had selected prior to enrolling at Northern, parents' reasons for seeking choice varied, and

parents often had multiple reasons for seeking out and accessing this school of choice (See Table 4.9).

Table 4.7 Type of Sending School

Regular Public	Private	Charter Public	Home school
17	9	2	1

Table 4.8 Type of Public School Children Attended During Previous Year

Neighborhood school	Open Enrollment	School choice NCLB	Charter
11 *	6	1 *	2

*Note: A * indicates a family accessed both option.*

Many parents commented on how their own education experiences influenced their school choice decisions, often in retrospect. As Ginger said, she and her husband both had traditional schooling backgrounds, and felt they breezed through school. As a result, they “Wanted to do all we could to challenge them. We felt Northern was going to give us a little more. We didn’t want them to coast” (2-2). Rose used the same phrase, “wanting more” for her own children, in talking about her retrospective dissatisfaction with her own schooling (16-8). As a result of growing up in a family that emphasized tolerance and acceptance of diversity, Colette wanted her children to “be at a school that taught diversity and taught tolerance of different people” (18-3). For Lily, who grew up “not understanding half the time, just memorizing,” she wanted her daughter’s inquisitive and knowledge-seeking sides to be nurtured (9-3). The parents in this study often mentioned the influence of their own schooling experiences in the course of our

discussions, which highlights the importance of understanding the multiple perspectives and realities inherent in any school choice context.

Thirteen parents cited attraction to Northern's philosophy and curriculum as a motivator for accessing choice (See Table 4.9). The school's emphasis on community, service, character development, and expeditionary learning were huge draws for these parents. As Rose said, "How can I not do this for my child?" (16-1). Parents like Pedro felt the school was a good fit: "[The school's] focus on character development and community involvement aligned with values I have that I wanted my children to have" (19-10). Academics, though an important consideration, were slightly less important for parents in this study. Instead, they were seeking, in Liam's words, a more "holistic approach to a human" (4-2). Dannie elaborated,

Learning how to be a good person, that will help [my daughter] in her experiences in life. It will reveal itself in her education. If you can't learn how to get along with others and give to the community, the education behind it isn't going to be useful. The private part [academics] is just extra! (23-11)

Another factor contributing to parents' choice was the quality of the pedagogy utilized by this school's staff (See Table 4.9). Twelve parents spoke about accessing a better opportunity as a motive for their choice, including Dannie: "People are drawn to it because they feel it is a better education" (23-10). Parents perceived that the chance to learn in different ways, including more hands-on activities, self-directed projects, and community service would benefit their children. Being exposed to different learning environments was seen as a positive for students' flexibility and adaptability. Sage said that as a family, "We wanted children to see opportunities and not be stifled" (20-1), and Crystal said for her, "More of it was the education. That [my daughter] was going to be freer to think her own mind" (12-1).

Table 4.9 Reasons/Motives/Catalysts for Seeking Choice

Reasons for Choice	# Families Expressing this Reason
Philosophy and Curriculum	13
Quality of Pedagogy	12
Recommendations from Social Networks	11
Problems for Children	9
Avoiding “Public Schools”	5
Financial Relief	4
Response to Unwanted Changes	4

Note: Parents expressed multiple reasons for their choice decisions, thus total is more than 33.

For eleven parents, recommendations from within their social networks contributed to their interest in choice (See Table 4.9), including Crystal, who said,

The choice came to us. We were not actively seeking choice. We really just put her in [the lottery] because of recommendations from other people and having no idea what it was about. (12-2)

Similarly, Mr. See said,

I was going on the faith of people that have their kids in [Northern], that I know, who just spoke so highly of it. If so-and-so’s kids are there...knowing people gives it credibility, like a 3rd party endorsement. (25-6)

Parents who accessed Northern primarily through social circles often spoke about not being unhappy with their children’s previous schools; as Dannie explained, it was “hard to leave our school—we really enjoyed it and felt like I was betraying them when we left.... We weren’t completely unhappy” (23-4). Ginger used similar phrasing when she said:

We weren't necessarily completely unhappy. Neighborhood school and pullout GATE was fine for both of the kids. We both have teaching backgrounds, so our kids are going to get that love of learning from us. (2-2)

For these parents, staying at their previous school would not have been a negative thing.

As Mzee said, "If we had stayed at Hoover, we would have been happy there, too" (7-11).

The "lottery effect," a term coined by Anna, is tied to a social network's influence on choice: "Holding a lottery makes people go, 'Oh, I want to go do that!'" (14-7).

Illustrating the lottery effect, Marilyn said the lottery made her think:

Wow, [Northern] really must be good if so many people want to go there that they have to hold a lottery. In my mind, [Northern] was more desirable because there were people willing to take their chances in the lottery. (22-10)

The lottery effect can also act as a deterrent. Dannie said, "We didn't take [Northern] seriously as an option due to the impossible odds of the lottery" (23-13). Sage described one drawback of the lottery effect: "Northern is built on this philosophy, but there are people there who got there by luck, by signing up for the lottery without a clue what it is all about" (20-10). Instead, perhaps they were motivated by thoughts like "It must be good—people gravitate towards good things" (Abbie, 26-9).

Existing problems acted as a major motivation for nine parents' choice decisions (See Table 4.9). Problems included bullying, boredom, and children being lost due to specific learning disabilities or needs. For some parents, like Isabel, the problems provided the motivation to overcome previously perceived barriers to accessing schools of choice: "[with my daughter's problems] I became motivated to find a place for her to go and find a way to make it work, however I could." (6-6). For these parents, choice

was not a choice, in that the problems were so severe, they would have chosen another school if they hadn't been selected in Northern's lottery.

Parents who had problems with being lost in large classes, bullied, and bored themselves in elementary school perceived their children were struggling with similar issues or wanted to avoid similar issues, including Lucy, who experienced tremendous bullying and said, "[I] could see myself in my son, and the school didn't do much about the bullying" (8-2). For parents who observed their children's academic progress faltering within the special education system, seeing how Northern's pedagogy used differentiated instruction to address the needs of GATE and SpEd learners within the general education classroom, sans pull-out services, was a big motivation (ex: Juli, 29-5).

Parents expressed frustration at regular public school staff that did not take their bullying and academic progress concerns seriously, including Cool Guy, who was told his child was fine and slow to mature, though subsequent testing revealed his son's significant learning disabilities that had gone un-addressed for years (15-9). However, as Abbie said,

Part of it wasn't so much the teachers, but the system. They didn't have the bandwidth to [individualize instruction] for 35 kids. There's no possible way you can give each child...individual teaching-learning validation with that many kids and without a network of support within the school. (26-2)

These parents perceived Northern, a school of 317, as being capable of addressing similar issues due to its pedagogy, staff, and commitment to community within the school.

Five parents mentioned avoiding "public schools" altogether as a motivator for accessing choice (See Table 4.9), including Ingrid, who said "[I was] not real excited about the 'public school' system, and wanted to avoid the large Junior High population" (5-2). A lack of academic challenge for kids who were above average, as well as the

bureaucracy necessary for controlling masses of children were seen as reasons for avoiding public schools. Liam said he grew increasingly frustrated with “Blanket rules that are pretty ludicrous [and are intended to serve a] few people controlling big amounts of people. It’s about control, not about self-character” (4-2). There is no reason, from Liam’s point of view, to have rules stating children may not take books out onto the playground (4-2). In these interviews, I asked parents to qualify what they meant by public schools, since charter schools are also public schools. It is worth noting that parents’ recognitions that charter schools were public schools were often tempered with qualifying statements about how charters are different than regular public schools, and that the public schools being discussed in their statements were actually regular public schools.

Four parents who had children enrolled in private schools mentioned financial relief as a motive for choice (See Table 4.9), including Surie, who said:

We were satisfied with [our private school] but basically [with Northern,] you are getting a private school education for a public school cost. That’s a big attraction for the parents who switched. (3-7)

Similarly, Rose said, “It is a good free alternative for [my daughter]” (16-2). Lastly, changes in a previously good school’s culture, purpose, and/or leadership motivated four parents to seek alternatives (See Table 4.9). A school becoming a GATE hub, a new principal who impacted the school’s culture negatively, and an influx of refugee and ELL students were all mentioned as changes initiating a search for options

Participants of this study showed that choice is not driven by a singular reason. Rather, parents were motivated to initiate choice by a complex of reasons, combined with

societal and personal influences. No parent gave only one reason, which reflects the importance of school choice decisions for most families.

Learning About Available Choices

Parents' motivation to seek choice was connected to how they learned about choice options. Parents tended to learn about choice through their social networks, including friends, co-workers, neighbors, family members, church, community reputation, and pre-school and school connections. As Dannie explained, someone they knew from pre-school got her children into Northern and raved about it, so "we put our application in 'on a whim'" (23-4). Regarding community perceptions, Pancho noted that, as a successful charter school, "[Northern] is a very big magnet. People [in the community] are very positive about the school" (10-3). Lucy found out about Northern through her church: "A lot of families who go there [are] in my church. It is an "in" crowd" (8-3), which may or may not be a positive thing.

While most parents had connections to Northern prior to enrolling a child, some discovered their connections to Northern's social networks only after becoming part of the school's community, including Pedro, who said he came in from the outside, selected the school, and found he overlapped social circles with Northern families once he moved to the area (19-2). This supports the idea that like attracts like regarding schools of choice and the parents who select them.

Because parents learned about choice options primarily through their social networks and word of mouth, they perceived that this could unfairly limit who accesses choice:

If your social circles don't ever overlap, how would you ever find out? The schools don't want to tell you because they get money from federal funds for enrollment. So they aren't going to tell parents choice options. (Elizabeth, 13-5)

As Mzee also explained,

The school district and charters don't advertise. There are no marketing campaigns, no PR. You have to make an effort to find out. You have to have the thought, 'Oh, I'm going to look at options!' (7-9)

This lack of marketing is not a purposeful tactic to limit access. Rather, successful schools of choice do not need to advertise because they have long waiting lists, and there would be no return on the investment of advertising (Mzee, 7-9).

Marilyn addressed the lack of knowledge of choice: "If I hadn't worked with someone and heard so much about it, I wouldn't have pursued it as much. We would have gone to our neighborhood school" (22-9). For Isabel, who did not know anyone within Northern's social circles, she would not have thought of selecting this charter school but for her college math tutor's mentioning it years ago: "I might have chosen a different public school. I didn't know about charters and different options"(6-5). Not only is easy access to information about schools of choice limited, common knowledge of what different choice options actually are is equally limited. As a result of generally limited knowledge of options, parents need to actively seek out information. Not all parents are going to do so, as Clementine explained:

If you work hard hours, come home exhausted, and are used to the status quo, then you might not find out about [choices]. If you are of the ilk that is a questioner and a learner and you want something better for your family, then it would be very easy to find [information about choice]. (21-8)

In other words, as Douglas explained, "You have to be an informed customer and figure out what is a good place to go" (30-7).

One choice option available within the larger district is open enrollment. Despite this being a choice option provided by the district, knowledge about this option also seems to be limited to parents' social networks. Those parents who talked about and/or had utilized open enrollment options either worked in education themselves, or they knew people who were utilizing open enrollment or worked in the schools. As Elizabeth said, "I don't think everyone realizes it is an open enrollment district and you can take your kids out. My brother told me, he's a teacher himself" (13-4). Sage and Lily both expressed concerns about open enrollment's susceptibility to politics, because schools used waiting lists, but appreciated the options open enrollment provided.

For those who follow in the footsteps of friends, family, and neighbors, "It is nice to have people that go before us and have common experiences and explain things to us" (Mzee, 7-11). Like children looking around at summer camp to see if they know anyone, parents rely on members of their social circles for cues about new environments. For those who did not have social networks that overlapped with Northern's network, entering into the school's community created uncertainty. To deal with this uncertainty, four parents talked about making pacts with neighbors, friends, and family members, in which they both turned in applications with the understanding: "Let's try, if one of us doesn't get in, we'll keep going to our [neighborhood] school" (Elizabeth, 13-2).

After becoming members of Northern's community, a few parents took on the role of "first initiator" for other members of their social networks, including Pedro, who recommended Northern to mono-lingual Spanish speaking family members living in difficult circumstances. At the time of our conversation, he reported, "they haven't tried to enroll. Folks struggling to survive are less likely to worry about school choice" (19-9).

Also trying to bring in members from her social circles, Isabel said that when she recommended the school to other parents, they expressed a belief that, “preference is given to higher income families because of their ability to support the school” (6-6). It is possible that people outside of a school’s social network may be more susceptible to misperceptions about the school.

Though this group of parents had all selected a school of choice for their children, they wondered about parents who were sending their children to neighborhood schools. Are regular public schools simply *good enough* for most families? Or is it more a default, in that parents who don’t choose simply make the easiest choice and view school as “you go to the school down the street. That’s what you do” (Ingrid, 5-7) because that’s how it has always been done. Colette wondered, “How many who go to regular public schools make an active conscious choice to do so? How many just do it, because it is the closest school and this is the bus stop?” (18-7).

Ginger, whose children had previously attended a school with a large population of refugee students, felt that many families, including refugee students, think their schools are fine: “Refugee families who are at neighborhood schools think they are getting a neat education” (2-6). Dannie echoed this, saying, “They are excited to be where they are and feel they are getting a good education. It is. But they don’t know the *potential*” (23-12). Though many refugee students attend schools that are failing to meet NCLB standards, few access the NCLB school choice options that failing schools/districts are required to provide. Amelia was the only parent in this study who utilized a NCLB choice option, sending her daughter to a different school with better GATE services when their neighborhood school greatly reduced services (27-3).

In the course of our conversations, the concern about families who don't choose and why they don't choose came up frequently, and led to the development of a theme on diversity, or perceived lack of diversity, among choosing parents.

Perceptions About Choosing Families

In the course of this study, parents explored the question of who chooses alternative schools for their children. Reflecting upon the parents they knew at Northern, as well as themselves, participants noted several common characteristics, including age, income, occupation, family structure, neighborhood location, and parental involvement. While most participants perceived that Northern's parents were fairly homogeneous along these perceived characteristics of choosing parents, for each characteristic at least one parent perceived wide diversity. Thus, perceptions may be connected to the characteristics held by a particular parent. Interestingly, when addressing questions about potential barriers to accessing choice, participants described similar characteristics to the ones discussed in the following section.

More Similar Than Different

Three participants specifically indicated that older parents—those in their 40's and 50's—could be more aware of choices and have more of the resources, including income and education, necessary to access choice. As one over-40 parent said,

There is a lot you are going to have to augment with your own time. I think that's why I see so many older parents at the private school and even at Northern. By then, you aren't struggling with the day-to-day; you have more flexibility, a little more income. (Abbie, 26-5)

Coming from the opposite view, another over-40 parent said, "No! I think everyone is younger than me. All these young moms!" (Clementine, 21-9), thus reinforcing the need to speak with many parents to access their different perspectives. As noted above, the

characteristic of age also illustrates the interconnectedness of the different traits recognized by participants.

Higher incomes and professional occupations were cited as characteristics of choosing families, and parents in families that earned less than sixty thousand dollars (\$60,000) a year, perceived more higher-income families at the school, while parents in families that earned more than \$60,000 a year perceived much more diversity in the income levels of families at the school. (The dividing point of \$60,000 was selected as a mid-point between mean and median incomes in the area.) On the subject of incomes as a characteristic of choosing families, Abbie said, “You have the ability to augment a lot of things you wouldn’t have to at a regular neighborhood school, like driving and finding friends” when you have more income (26-5).

The characteristic of income was closely tied to family structure. Parents in this study felt the majority of families at Northern were 2-parent households with one parent either staying home full time, or having a flexible schedule. Five parents in this study were single/divorced/separating, and all indicated they were not able to participate in the school as much as they used to, or would like to. As Dannie said,

A typical Northern family has 2 parents, and one can stay home to volunteer. [A] typical regular public school family has both parents working, or divorced or single parent. (23-10)

Though this family structure may be typical of this particular school of choice, Douglas, whose sons attended Community Charter, said,

[Northern’s] parents have enough. They are in a position where one person can work and one person can spend a lot of time at the school. Community Charter would love to have that happen, but their population just isn’t that way. (30-3)

All of the parents in this study were actively involved in their children's education, and they perceived involvement as a characteristic that unanimously defined choosing parents. Active involvement was related to income, according to Cool Guy, who said,

Kids get into Northern because parents actively pursue getting their kids in there. Parents who actively pursue are most likely going to have a higher socio-economic status, are probably more successful, and with that have higher standards for their children's behavior. (15-10)

Parental involvement is also linked to family structure, as pointed out by Esmerelda: "If both of us had full time jobs, we would not be volunteering. How many households [at Northern] have both parents working?" (10-7). These parents' perceptions of family structure were supported by the demographics collected for this study.

Parents in this study unanimously identified education as a characteristic of choosing families, including Pancho, who said, "There seems to be a high percentage of parents with college educations. Maybe they are better equipped to do some of those things [volunteer, help with homework]" (10-6). Additionally, the characteristics of income and education intersected in the characteristic of neighborhoods, in that well educated families with higher incomes tend to live in similar neighborhoods, as Pancho explained:

Some of the schools we would probably have a preference for, like [school name], would have similar demographics [as] this geographic area which has [people who are environmentally friendly], more expensive housing, and a desirable location with access to everything. (10-10)

Speaking about the kinds of parents who access both open enrollment as well as this charter school, Douglas also talked about the characteristics of students attending the schools often selected through choice:

[They have] a real solid base of real educated parents. That group of kids is generally highly motivated in academics. A lot of those people live in good neighborhoods. (30-3)

Highly educated parents are also more likely to have questioning minds, and seek out options, according to Clementine (21-8).

Furthering the notion that schools of choice self-select for particular characteristics, Douglas felt that Northern operated from a position of strength, due to the characteristics of enrolling families and due to its waiting list (30-5). He perceived that fewer “school hoppers” (families that move from school to school when their children have or cause problems) would get into Northern due to the lottery. Instead, these students would be more likely to enroll in schools of choice that do not have waiting lists, like the charter school his sons attended before Northern. Douglas continued:

The kids at Community Charter are even more desperate for additional funds and they are being given less. Whereas a school like Northern, just to generalize it, is not a place that needs a lot of extra funds. My kids don’t need extra funds. If they were struggling we would find a way to pay for tutors or aids or whatever resources they needed. At Community Charter, I met parents who were disabled, couldn’t work, [and] hadn’t finished high school. (30-5)

While agreeing that there were certain characteristics of choosing families, Marilyn asked, “Lot’s of Subaru’s and tie dye. Does that mean those people are drawn to *choice*, or are they drawn to [*Northern*]?” (22-8). The question of how choice influences choosers and choosing was worth investigating more deeply with these parents.

Choosing Influences Homogeneity of Choosing Families

The main reason given by parents in this study for the perceived homogeneity of characteristics shared by choosing parents was the very act of choosing: “The reason you don’t see more of a broad base here, even though it is a public school, is that it takes a certain amount of initiative to get into Northern” (Surie, 3-4). While Ingrid noted, “there

do seem to be more affluent kids who go to charter public schools,” she also asked, “Why? It’s a lottery. [Getting in] has nothing to do with income. Are folks on the lower ends focused on their job, making it through day to day?” (5-8). Other parents mentioned a lack of socio-economic diversity, including Mzee:

At Hoover, [I] saw a lot of troubled kids and families, single parent homes, everything else. At Hoover, daycare, Boys & Girls Club, we saw the same people. We don’t see them at Northern. [It’s a] white, upper-class school. [There are] other races, but not statistically the same. They aren’t the poor, refugee, etc (7-9).

Lucy shared a similar perspective:

[You] don’t see low-income families at Northern. See them at Boys & Girls Club, but not at Northern. [Northern is located] in Community X, but no Community X kids [are enrolled]. Why? (8-9)

An answer to Lucy and Ingrid’s question “Why” may lie in how schools of choice are passed on through social networks. Schools of choice tend to attract similar people (Marilyn, 22-8) because: “The people you would engage or connect with in the community, and in philosophies of life, are also interested in a school like [Northern]” (Marney, 1-3). Amelia described the homogeneity she saw in the school’s population:

There are a lot of relatively affluent...those kids have a lot of perks in their lives. They travel, they have everything they need, and their families are putting them in a lot of extra activities. (27-5)

Amelia continued,

Northern [doesn’t have] a real diverse population, but a lot of the things that are not diverse there have been really wonderful things. The families are very involved; they are sensitive to diversity, inclusion, and social justice and human rights. (27-5)

The inclusive nature of this school community that Amelia described, and the positive outcomes of that community on the school’s culture, may distort or minimize some parents’ perceptions of diversity because other parents felt that there was diversity, and

that every demographic was represented and integrated into the whole school community (Ingrid, 5-8). According to Ginger, “Northern draws people from all walks of life, because of what the philosophy is. A lot of different economic backgrounds are going to be drawn to that” (2-6). As a member of a bi-racial family, Pedro observed that, while “Northern is probably segregated along socio-economic lines. [It is] less pronounced, and more diverse than the other schools we’ve been to” (19-7) in the city.

Three parents declined to pass judgment on diversity, saying they had only been there a short while or had not met many people, and hesitated to repeat what they had heard through word of mouth. Despite participants’ lack of unanimity regarding diversity, they expressed unanimity in feeling that any child could do well at the school, and credited the school’s culture, curriculum, and pedagogy as reasons.

Perceiving Equity and Access to Choice

A theme that naturally emerged during the course of the first few interviews was equity of access to schools of choice. As a result, I talked with participants about issues that they had wrestled with during their choice decisions, which they perceived could be problematic for other families. Though these parents had all come to positive resolution in their concerns about securing transportation, juggling work and school schedules, having time to volunteer, being able to financially support the school, and handling the enrollment/lottery process and the uncertainty of getting in to the school, participants considered these were all issues that could potentially cause a family to not access this particular school of choice.

Perceiving Potential Barriers to Access

Interestingly, perceived barriers were often characteristics participants identified in choosing families, just opposite ends of the characteristics' spectrums. For example, while participants perceived that choosing families tended to have two parents, they perceived being a single parent as a potential barrier.

Parents identified transportation as a major consideration in their choice decisions. According to Mzee, "Transportation is a big issue for parents who work or are single parents" (7-9). Like most charter public schools, Northern does not have a bus system. Thus, "Most parents travel to that school. They have to drive some distance to get there rather than kids just walking to school" (Anna, 14-5). As a result, "Transportation could cause families to say no, that wouldn't work for us" (Lucy, 8-9) and "Driving limits those who see [Northern] as a viable option. It is a lot to juggle, with work" (Abbie, 26-5). Being able to transport children to school is a daily aspect of enrollment in charter public schools.

Northern relies heavily on parental involvement, something all participants considered during their enrollment process. These parents perceived that the school's expectation of involvement could be a barrier: "It would be really hard to be at a school like this [if you can't help out]. Which is too bad because you want everyone to feel like they can come to the school" (Rose, 16-6). Knowing how much involvement is needed to make Northern successful, interested parents might say, "Oh, I couldn't possibly be that involved, and if I can't be that involved, then maybe they won't take me" (Rose, 16-7). Perceiving that single parents might be especially vulnerable to perceiving involvement as a barrier, Lucy said, "With the time I put in [on homework], I'm not sure

how a single parent could do it” (8-7). The two single parents interviewed for this study agreed that being involved during school hours was a difficult challenge that they made up for through financial contributions.

However, the perception that Northern’s families need to provide financial support for the school’s success was also perceived as a potential barrier to lower income families who might “feel more pressure or guilt in feeling they are not contributing” (Isabel, 6-4). Parents in this study talked about making adjustments in family budgets in order to contribute financially, including changes in jobs and spending habits. For families without the financial resources, Northern can start to seem like an expensive school (Lucy, 8-10), and although the school does not require parents to pay, it seems “almost a semi-private school in some respects...you have to volunteer...pay voluntarily” (Mzee, 7-7). The perception of financial support as a barrier was stronger among participants who were not a part of Northern’s social network prior to enrollment and weaker among parents who had accessed private schools as choice options prior to enrollment at Northern.

In addition to transportation and involvement, participants noted that single parents, parents with children at multiple schools, and households with two working parents might also find Northern’s adjusted schedule and extra days off for staff development difficult to accommodate. The school has an accelerated day, with extra minutes added to the start and end times, as well as additional days off during the school year, and, as Esmerelda said, “If you are a parent, what are you going to do with that kid if you are working?” (10-9). According to Johan, the scheduling issues “do sort out some of the people,” though not intentionally (2-7). “Scheduling is not a small glitch. It is a

big deal,” Pancho summarized (10-9). The importance of this issue was reinforced by the number of families (23) in this study who had one parent staying home or working on a flexible schedule.

The enrollment process, as well as day-to-day communication at Northern, relies on technology. Two parents shared their enrollment stories, in which they used Internet, cell phone, printer, and fax machine to enroll children without setting foot on campus (Ingrid, 5-8; Isabel, 6-2). Regarding school communication, Clementine observed, “I am almost positive everyone has a computer or access to a computer nowadays” (21-9), while Isabel expressed concern that “Low-income families might not have a computer or Internet” and the school needed to incorporate “more face to face or phone communication” (6-6). Thus, while access to technology was perceived as a potential barrier to both enrollment and participation in the school’s community, none of these parents experienced it as such because all had access to technology.

Beyond the use of technology, participants considered the enrollment process itself to be a potential barrier to some families, and a barrier many had wrestled with in the past: eleven families had attempted enrolling at Northern prior to this year but had not been drawn in the lottery. The uncertainty of enrollment is unsettling to parents used to just signing up at a school and sending their child the next day: “If our friends hadn’t encouraged us...I wouldn’t have gotten involved. ‘What’s a lottery? What do you mean I have to get on a list?’” (Lily, 9-8). Though Biff felt the lottery was not a barrier, because the waiting list was fair (17-2), and Abbie felt that everyone had a chance (26-8), Marilyn perceived the lottery to be a barrier to families with multiple children (22-8),

when enrollment was offered to one child but not another. In combination, Surie perceived the multiple hoops of enrollment to be a significant barrier:

You have to be aware of the school, be aware of the rules/boundaries, get your act together to get in the lottery, be flexible enough to move your child immediately, and work your daycare and transportation around it. (3-5)

Once enrolled, the expectations of parents at Northern can be perceived as an additional layer of potential barriers.

Parents at Northern are expected to help their children more at home, and Isabel perceived that parents' education levels and work schedules would influence their ability to adequately support their children's learning (6-5). In agreement, Liam said:

Many parents in our community...this school wouldn't work for them. They don't have the education, the background, the structure at home to support Northern's pedagogy. (4-3)

In general, parents perceived that for some families, the expectation for parents to help with schoolwork "might scare families away, too" (Lucy, 8-11), and that overall, being a part of Northern's learning community requires parents to make adjustments to their lives in order to "make it work" (Abbie, 26-4). These adjustments can be, as Surie said, "a little bit self-limiting. I see a lot of grandparents picking kids up. So you have to have the resources to make it work for you" (3-5).

As if combating the real barriers to enrollment weren't enough, parents identified inaccurate perceptions held by outsiders to the Northern community as potential barriers to access. Common misperceptions included: "only rich kids go to charter schools"; "it is a private school"; "you can buy your way in"; "GATE kids don't go there"; "it is parent run"; "the lottery is weighted for wealthy, educated parents"; and "you have to donate so much time." Parents perceived outsiders would be less inclined to apply for enrollment

at Northern because these misperceptions would make the school seem less of an option for lower-income families, single-parent families, parents without flexible schedules or a stay-at-home parent, and parents who do not feel welcome in schools or within the social circles of this school (ex., Lucy, 8-4). Though reviewing Northern's web site and enrollment applications would clear up any of these misperceptions, it is worth considering that parents would not access the school's literature unless they perceived the school was a viable option, yet they determine viability primarily through word of mouth and social recommendations, which are often inaccurate or skewed, as revealed in this study.

Perceptions About Choosing and Choosers

In describing reasons for choices, parents in this study often used the word "best" or "better" in combination with "effort," such as:

Anyone who makes the effort into putting their child into a lottery for a school is looking for something better for their child. The types of people who are putting their kids into charter public schools are willing to jump through the hoops of the lottery. (Crystal, 12-5)

Part of many parents' definitions of being a good parent included shopping around for schools, what Mr. See called "Doing the good mom thing, going around, finding the good school" (25-8). Pedro described himself as a seeker of information (19-5), while Jade described how she searched day care options when they first moved to the area, eventually previewing about 30 different facilities (15-4). According to Lily, everyone who chooses to go to Northern wants the same thing: "the best education for their kids" (12-5), and Muffy said, "If you are more active in your kids' lives, you are more likely to choose" (17-8). An outlier, Sage did not present Northern as a "better" place to her children. Rather, it was "different. It might give you different opportunities" (20-5).

Amelia labeled parental searching as “educational sensitivity,” saying that her family was an outlier at Northern because of their lower educational sensitivity and lack of engagement in a big search for the best school for their children (27-8). Amelia’s family chose Northern because their new location made it the best transportation option as well as education option (27-8).

For the parents in this study, choice requires effort, and effort implies care. With the positive values attributed to choosing parents, there may be a perception that parents who go to their neighborhood schools do so because they don’t care—it’s just close (Clementine, 21-12). Comparing different families, Juli said, “[choosing parents] really want a say in their child’s educational plan. They want their child to do better... I think people who don’t choose, they just don’t care” (29-13). Similarly, Biff said,

More people who had a vested interest in kids’ education choose charter public schools. People are there because they took the initiative.... These people here [at Quince] don’t care as long as the school is within reach. Kids can get to it, walk, ride bike, or bus. [Parents] aren’t going to put that much effort into it. (17-8)

Choosing to go to a school other than one’s neighborhood school necessitates sacrifices and efforts, including transporting children to and from school without the benefit of a bussing system: “You make that choice. My kids could have kept walking to school. I have to drive several times a day. I knew what was involved and I said this is worth it” (Anna, 14-6).

Parents who choose must “buy into” what it requires to participate in schools of choice like Northern, including transportation, parent involvement, financial support, and working around the school’s schedule. As Johan said, “I think a lot of the parents who are dedicated find a way to do it” (28-7). After talking about the potential barriers, Clementine wryly summarized, “[Northern is] only accessible to people who are smart

enough to figure out how to get there or determined enough to get there” (21-8). In the end, parents tended to use words like “willing,” “worth it,” “choice,” and “dedication” to describe the sacrifices choosing parents make in going outside of their school of residence.

However, Synthia used the term “best” to describe neighborhood schools: “for some families, what is best is their neighborhood school” (11-10), and Laurie said, “Unless it is really important to the parents or the kid, or they are outside that normal area, that bell curve, I think regular public schools work fine” (24-11). Continuing in the same vein, Rose said:

Not all parents or families really think beyond public education. [They] don’t research, don’t go seeking for other options if they are happy enough with where they are and what their kids are doing. (16-7)

Marney ties this thought back to families who do choose, without value-laden terminology:

Maybe that’s a piece, where people who are looking for a different fit because where they have been doesn’t fit because they have some different needs, some exceptional needs. (1-4)

And maybe those who stay with their regular public schools *are* experiencing a good fit.

Fairness, Luck, and the Lottery

In the context of our discussions about choosing Northern, parents frequently used three phrases: fairness, luck, and the lottery. These phrases imply things that are out of our control. When considering issues of equity and access, the idea that individual children have limited access to a good education by virtue of luck troubled many parents. First, access to choice may not be fair, due to parents’ access to information about choices (Abbie, 26-9). As Lucy explained, word of mouth information:

[Is] not fair for everybody. Limits to a certain crowd, a certain group. Limits to a clique—a group of women who pass on to friends and their friends... What about people who aren't getting the word of mouth? (8-4)

Additionally, certain groups of people may have less opportunity to make choices. As

Synthia said:

So many of my public school friends gave me that argument before I sent my children to Geysers Charter. That it isn't fair, and people with lower socio-economic status, they don't have the opportunity to put their children in a lottery and to drive them to and from schools. (11-4)

Other parents expressed similar thoughts, including Johan, who explained:

The people who are struggling to get by are probably the people who are not able to make the choice. If they are not able to make a choice... hopefully they live in an area with a nicer school. (28-8)

The thought that circumstances of birth could determine the quality of a child's education concerned Clementine as she spoke about her discomfort with private schools:

Coming from public schools [as a child], there was guilt, doing something other people couldn't do; despite [Hillock's] beautiful philosophy about community, you could only go there if you had money. That isn't right or fair. (21-7)

Along with fairness, there is the issue of luck. Every single parent who participated in this study made some reference to luck when talking about enrolling children at Northern. That the term "lottery" is used in reference to the random drawing of names for the waiting list may be behind parents' use of words like luck, fortune, and blessings when describing how they got in to Northern: "It was a fluke"; "We got lucky"; and "It was a godsend." The term "lottery" may also engender words dealing with competition, acceptance, and winning: "We won the lottery!"; "Oh my gosh, they want her!"; "We were accepted"; and "He was selected."

In this study, parents agreed the lottery was the only fair way to assign open slots to interested families when interest exceeded openings: "Every family has the access.

You can choose, but you may not be lucky enough to get in” (Esmerelda, 11-10).

However, parents indicated that luck shouldn’t dictate whether kids have access to excellent educations:

It’s not fair that we got that. Just because we were lucky to have our numbers drawn so that our child gets that education. There are a lot of other kids at [our old] school who could benefit. (Dannie, 23-12)

Parents desired more schools like Northern, so more children could have the opportunity.

This chapter began with a summary of the findings for descriptive statistics of this study’s context and participants, and then focused on parents’ perceptions about issues surrounding choice. Understanding these parents’ school choice decisions provided information about the complexity of reasons that motivate parents to seek out choice, as well as the myriad ways they find out about choice, with notable emphasis on social networks and being involved in education related occupations.

Participants’ perceptions about diversity among choosing families varied greatly, based on their own experiences and frames of reference. However, they identified characteristics that described choosing parents, such as age, income, education level, and family structures, which in turn provided information about potential barriers to accessing choice. For example, if all of the families who accessed choice have college educations, why would education be a factor, and how could lack of education be a barrier?

While no one indicated purposeful, intentional barriers, most noted structures, systems, and expectations that could be difficult for some families to meet, in that during their enrollment process, their own family had to consider how they would rise to the challenges of transportation, involvement, financial contributions, and adjusting to school schedules. Finally, in the course of our conversations, certain phrases regarding fairness,

lottery, and luck, as well as perceptions about choosing parents were used so often that they emerged as sub-themes deserving consideration.

In the end, this section hints at the conflict between private and public goods of education, and foreshadows Chapter Five, the next section of the findings, which examines parents' perspectives on parental involvement at Northern and at their previous schools, how parental involvement impacts schools, and how schools that self-select for involved parents may be setting themselves up for success. Chapter Six, the final section of the findings, shares parents' perceptions about school improvement and how school choice may influence school improvement.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS—PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The Complexities of Being Involved in Schools

Parental involvement, according to parents in this study, is a key component of Northern's success. Within the school, family members help in classrooms, facilitate community curriculum modules, transport students to field trips and learning expeditions, and gather and prepare materials for classroom activities. Outside of the school, family members contribute through fundraising activities, serving on the school's parent council, planning events, assisting children with home assignments, and maintaining/improving the facilities. Additionally, families support the school through financial donations.

According to the school's web site, parental involvement "is nurtured as a primary asset of our school." During numerous visits to Northern, I walked into the school building at various times of the day, and found parents involved in activities on every occasion. Through the numerous bulletin boards filled with information for families, binders with more information for families, check-in sheets for volunteer hours, and multiple ways for families to get involved, Northern welcomes and includes families as an integrated part of the school's community (observations and interviews). Parents perceived a connection between the school's success and the level of parent involvement: "If you took Quince and had that same level of involvement you would have an incredible improvement in the performance of the kids" (Amelia, 27-6).

All parents in this study identified ways in which they contributed to this school's success. From families who primarily contributed financial support to parents who

identified multiple ways that they were involved (See Table 5.1), they all felt they were involved and connected to the school. Due to the importance of involvement at Northern, each interview touched on the topic of parental involvement in a myriad of ways. Thus, like Choice in Chapter Four, Parental Involvement emerged as one of the major themes of this study.

Table 5.1 Types of Parental Involvement and Number of Families That Participated

Type of Involvement	# of Families
Classroom Volunteer	23
Donations of Money	20
Community Based Curriculum	18
Non-classroom Volunteer	10
Facilities Upkeep/Maintenance	9
Fundraising	6
Other: Chess club, driving, electives, celebrations, supplies	5
None Specifically Indicated	2

Note: Participants selected all types of involvement their family participated in.

A World of Difference

One topic most parents addressed in our conversations was how parental involvement at Northern compared with involvement at their children's previous school. For most parents who came from a private school setting, parent involvement at Northern was similar to what they experienced before (Abbie, 26-4), although one parent said there was more emphasis on involvement at Northern (Rose, 16-5). For most parents who

came from a public school situation, the level of involvement at Northern was far more than what they observed at their children's previous school. As Dannie said:

When I would go in to Craters, I felt like I had to [help out], because nobody else was going to. At Northern, so many people are supporting each other. It is not do or die if you miss something. (23-7)

A heavily involved parent before coming to Northern, Juli said,

These parents [at Northern] are on steroids. That's how much they are involved. What a difference, night and day, when parents are involved in their child's education and when they are not, over here at JFK. (29-2)

This led our conversations to the reasons behind the differences.

“Parent involvement isn't *limited* in regular public schools, [the environment] is just not *conducive* to it” (Dannie, 23-12). Participants indicated that a school's lack of interest or even press back (insistence that parents do not get involved) combined with not valuing/validating parents' time was seen as part of the issue. Crystal observed, “At Matterhorn, there were tons of parents that volunteered. They didn't have stuff for us to do. They were putting us in rooms cutting out things” (12-6). However, after reflecting on her experience as a PTO president, Sage pointed out that parents are a limited resource in regular public schools, a resource that must be used wisely because “there is only so much they can do” (20-7). Perhaps the limited pool of parents is related to the “stay out” attitude many parents perceived from their children's former teachers: “We are the teachers. You check in, we'll let you know what the home work and stuff is, but we have it covered” (Mr. See, 25-7).

The other perceived issue contributing to a lack of involvement in other schools was parent/school demographics. According to Johan, schools struggling with academic success have minimal parental involvement (28-8). According to demographics, schools

struggling with academic success tended to have higher ELL, higher F&R Lunch, and higher SpEd populations than schools not struggling with academic success (See Table 4.5). Additionally, in regular public schools, those who can't or don't volunteer at school don't feel an obligation to do anything, similar to other government programs that provide "free" services (Sage, 20-7). As Sage theorized, "Those [parents] who don't do anything are not *expected* to make up the difference, monetarily or otherwise" (20-6). Though Northern and Quince might have the same numbers of parents participating on campus during the day, the parents at Northern who aren't there are most likely committing time and/or resources to the school in other ways, whereas those at Quince are most likely not (Sage, 20-6).

Given these perceived differences in the levels of parental involvement between Northern and other schools, our conversations hit upon how parental involvement is different, and what exactly Northern expected from parents. Involvement differs in the amount that is expected and in the variety of ways parents were involved at home and at school, but more importantly, it differs in that they were expected to be involved, and that their involvement was deemed necessary for the success of the school.

One aspect of parental involvement that was consistently brought up by participants in this study was that they were being asked by the school to assist their children more with homework. Not only was this seen as a notable difference from their own school experiences, when their parents had very little to do with their homework, but most felt that the work at Northern was excessive when compared to what their child received at their previous school. Liam said the amount of work the Northern staff required of parents, in terms of correcting assignments, monitoring kids' work at home,

and making sure papers were turned in on time, was significantly more than what was required in more traditional settings (4-3). In contrast, three parents felt that Northern's homework expectations were less than what was expected at their children's previous schools—two private, one charter public.

Parents identified the school's different curriculum as well as differences in how school time was used as possible explanations for the increased homework expectations. As Isabel said, at Northern, "students are exposed to a different type of learning environment and the expectations for their achievement are a lot higher" (6-3). Mzee agreed, explaining that from his perspective:

At Northern, they are having less time on scholastics and more time on other programs... community based curriculum, and all school meetings on Wed. morning, and [learning expeditions]...other things. Whereas when we were in school it seems like we had the same structure every day, math for an hour, reading for an hour.... maybe we did a lot of that at school and because they don't have as much time in class they are pushing some of the rudimentary stuff like reading and math at home because they don't have time. (7-6)

Interestingly, in this quote, Mzee did not recognize learning expeditions, service learning, community-based curriculum, and all school meetings as methods of integrating literacy instruction and academic content into children's instructional time at school. His perception may be related to the fact that his choice of Northern was based primarily on recommendations from his social network rather than a conscious seeking out of Northern's pedagogy.

Nature or Nurture?

A question parents pondered was whether parental involvement was a behavior choosing parents brought to the school choice table, or a behavior schools nurtured through expectations and encouragement. Most parents perceived the lower involvement

among parents at their children's former schools was partially due to what parents brought to the table (nature), and partially due to what the school's environment created/encouraged in parents once they arrived (nurture). The following components were suggested as evidence for both sides of the nature/nurture question.

For most parents, even before enrolling children at Northern, parental participation expectations were clear: "coming in, they tell you parent involvement is necessary and part of why [Northern] is successful" (Abbie, 26-4). This contrasts with many regular public schools, where the expectations are not there, and parental involvement primarily occurs in classrooms during school hours, or at home supervising students' homework (Sage, 20-7). Northern provides many opportunities, both in school and out of school, for families to get involved in the success of the school. For many parents, when they arrived at Northern, they perceived a smorgasbord of ways for parents to get involved, like a series of doors opening up: "Ooh, which door do I choose? So many options! I want to do them all!" (Ginger, 2-4). Compared to their former school settings, where parents like Amelia felt "the school [communicated], Go away, don't bother us!" (27-6), Northern was "very welcoming. They want parents there" (Elizabeth, 13-7).

The school also needs parents there to support the model of learning, which is based on many off-campus excursions (Colette, 18-6). Though most knew they would be needed to help with transportation for field trips and service learning, even the previously "most involved" parents were taken aback by how much involvement was needed at Northern (Rose, 16-5). Synthia summarized that the level of parental involvement was, "part of being a parent in a charter school, that you are able and willing to do that" (11-8).

And in many ways, participating is easier at Northern because there are so many ways to get involved, so many things that need parental support (Anna, 14-6). Parents indicated they not only valued choice in their school, but they also valued choice in the variety of ways they could get involved, which allowed them to participate in meaningful ways in their child's education.

In addition to wanting to be needed, parents also wanted their time to be put to good use instead of feeling teachers were scrambling to occupy them with something, anything. Clementine correlated Northern's ability to use parents with the school's solid curriculum: "If you are not organized enough in your own day, how can you ask someone to come in and help you?" (21-5). In their previous school settings, parents felt they were not validated as a needed resource (Crystal, 12-7), including Amelia, who said, "I would ask how I could help in the classroom but the teachers didn't utilize me" (27-6). Pedro described his negative experience volunteering in his daughter's former school, where he felt scolded for sitting in the wrong place and then waited 45 minutes before being allowed to talk for 15 minutes with students. This contrasted sharply with his experience at Northern when he was contacted by his daughter's teacher to present in his area of expertise, given specific content to cover, and asked to provide an outline before presenting in class for an hour (19-6). Similar to how students feel when they contribute to their class, Northern operates as "a community of people pulling together," with parents contributing in different and meaningful ways (Ginger, 2-4).

Despite the differences between the schools they were involved in prior to Northern, parents in this study were predisposed to be involved, if not extremely involved, since day one of their children's education. Four parents mentioned

participating in their cooperative preschool and how that primed them to be involved in their children's schooling, including Johan, who said, "Co-op preschool was just a natural step to help out at school and things" (28-9). Juli, a highly involved parent, said,

When I was PTO president, I had the same 5 parents who stayed with me all the way. We were the powerhouses. We did everything. We were the ones who ran that school. To get anyone else to volunteer was like pulling teeth. (29-2)

Some parents in this study said they were not as involved as they used to be, citing life challenges, including divorce, new jobs, and illnesses, for the change. However, they still participated at Northern, and felt they were more involved than most parents at their children's former schools (ex: Lily, 9-6; Marney, 1-8; Isabel, 6-4), and described feeling that the culture at Northern acted to reinforce participation, and acknowledged they might not be participating at the same level if they were still at their children's former schools.

The Northern school community identifies with parents as partners in education. As Anna said, "If you move into a culture of everyone pitching in, kids as well, everyone participating as team members... That's the expectation, that's what you are signing up for" (14-6). Parents coming on board needed to embrace that philosophy of community (Ginger, 2-5), in order to plan the life changes that would be necessary to participate fully in the culture of the school. After being drawn in the lottery, Colette (18-7) and Pedro (19-6) both spoke to their spouses about reorganizing their workloads to accommodate more time for volunteering in the school. For parents who are not regular participants in the culture of parent volunteers, the peer pressure of expectations still influences actions, as Clementine illustrated with a story about a mom who couldn't get to school, and who also didn't have a lot of money, but she still wanted to give what she could: "There's that

pride there” (21-9) and a desire to be accepted as a contributing member of that community.

Most parents expressed feeling they were not alone, and that seeing other parents being involved helped them avoid feeling like they were going to be left holding the bag because they were only one of a limited handful that helped. Estimating the level, Julie said, “There are probably over 50 women who are constantly there all the time, volunteering” (29-2). However, there were two parents who thought there would be more involvement, and did feel pressure to help when they really wanted to say no. One of those parents said, “I don’t want the kids to miss out. There have been times when it really felt like I have to do this or it isn’t going to happen.” (Rose, 16-5). For these parents, personal factors, and/or the particular classroom their children were in, may have factored into their feelings of pressure.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the characteristics of parents who choose to enroll their children at Northern may make them more able to participate from the outset (Marney, 1-6), including flexible schedules and a dedication to what their kids are doing (Johan, 28-6). More importantly, they don’t have characteristics that tend to *limit* participation: “At Northern you just don’t have most of those issues [struggling families have]. It is a rare family that doesn’t have *everything* going for them” (Amelia, 27-6). Furthermore, those who might have limitations are more likely to overcome them as a result of both the array of ways and times a person can contribute and participate on some level, as well as the school’s communication of parent help as a necessity.

The idea that the parents attracted to choice, or to Northern in particular, are qualitatively different served as a conversation spark during the interviews. The act of

choosing may influence parents' attitudes towards parental involvement in two ways.

First, the act of searching and choosing may self-select for parents who are more willing and able to put in extra time on behalf of their children:

There is a lot that goes into even getting into Northern. If you are not willing to put in the time to do that, you are probably also not willing to put in the time to volunteer and help the school. (Johan, 28-6)

Or, as Clementine said,

If you are actively looking for something different, you are already of the mindset that you are going to be putting in the hours. If you are willing to search it out, you are probably willing to put the hours in. (21-6)

Second, those who “put their names on the list and do the research will already know there is more parental involvement in the model” (Colette, 18-7), and thus will know, going in, what is expected.

For those parents who might be less able to be involved, due to job, time, finances, and/or personal limitations, the school's communication of the need for volunteers contributes to the high level of involvement at Northern. Parents do not feel like visitors when they come on campus, and the communication of need through emails and postings on campus help parents stay “plugged in” (Mr. See, 25-7). As Anna said, it is easier to be involved “because there are so many things going on, needing that parental support to get it done” (14-6). Additionally, structures within the school encourage an ever growing, self-feeding cycle of involvement, as described by Clementine:

The sign in sheet, knowing the school needs to log in hours for a grant... The physical act of writing down your hours makes you want to write them down more and your being there makes the school a better place. (21-6)

The sign in sheet then attracts more parents wanting to enroll their children (Clementine, 21-6). It is as if there is a symbiotic relationship between parents being needed and schools needing help.

Guilt and Pressure: Living up to Expectations

The culture of involvement combined with the sheer number of involved parents can make some parents feel pressure and guilt that they are not performing up to expectations, regardless of how valid their reasons for not participating may be: “There is definitely this peer pressure and guilt of participation. Not purposeful, but it is there” (Collette, 18-7). Isabel explained, “I help with what I can, monetary support. But I’m a single mom, full time job, just not able to help with transportation” (6-4). Parents identified both internal and external sources of guilt and pressure.

Expressing her internal source of pressure, Collette explained, “I have done more than in the past, but felt guilty about not doing more because of my medical issues. [That said,] I am probably average or above average” for Northern (18-6). Similarly, Rose expressed frustration at changes in her life that reduced her ability to help: “maybe it is part of my frustration at being a full time working mom now. Not what I wanted to be doing! I can’t provide as much help as I would like” (16-5). The sources of guilt and pressure can also be external: “All the emails that come out asking, ‘Okay, here’s another opportunity for you to drive the kids to whatever it is that we are doing. I really need your help. Can you help?’” (Rose, 16-5). Juli, previously one of the most involved parents at her school, said, “I feel like I am running with the wolves and can’t keep up” (29-2) with the enthusiastic involvement at Northern.

Parents in this study did feel that Northern's high level of involvement meant the school could easily carry families who are not as involved:

We know of a couple of families that are more stressed, and the parents aren't involved much and I don't feel that their absence is felt because there are so many other parents involved. (Amelia, 27-6)

Having at least half of the families participating at any one time would be enough to ensure the school's needs were met (Colette, 18-6). But it seemed important to consider why parents were less involved in regular public schools, given how connected involvement was to school success:

I don't know if more parents don't want to, or are too busy, maybe work too much? There are lots of parents who are involved, but maybe there aren't as many opportunities [in other schools]? (Anna, 14-5)

Our conversations then turned to reasons today's parents may not contribute their time to schools.

Amelia looked to outside stressors to explain the perceived differences in parental involvement: "In those families that are so stressed, that finding time to be involved with the school is a lot...being so stressed is partly why the kids are having so much trouble" (27-6). Family stressors that might limit participation were similar to factors related to accessing choice, in Chapter Four, and included language barriers, changes in family structure due to divorce and illness, finances, single-parent families, refugee families figuring out how to live, transportation concerns, legal problems, drug problems, and grandparents with custody. For such families, participation "would be difficult because, in the case of a single parent, if you are juggling a job and kids, it is a time commitment that some people just probably don't have" (Pancho, 10-6).

Some participants, due to personal experiences as parents and/or educators, acknowledged that life circumstances could interfere with parents' abilities to be involved: "I am in a place where it is easier for me to be involved. Other people can't or won't. A lot of parents would resist the change. Asks them to do more, which is difficult" (Marney, 1-6). Rose, who used to be a full-time, at-home mom, emphasized:

Now I work full time and I see how often I can't do it and it gives me a different perspective on how other parents...it is not that they don't *want* to, but they can't fit one more thing into their schedule, or they have multiple children. (16-5)

Rather than judging those who don't participate, Clementine felt that the school, as well as the parents who do participate, need to reach out with information and support: "Parents who don't pick kids up, and who don't come into the school to volunteer, it is harder to reach them with information," but those in charge of organizing parent involvement needed to try (21-9).

Parents described families in regular public schools as typically having more stressors that would interfere with being involved, and described families at Northern as typically having "everything going for them" with few stressors (Amelia, 27-6). Amelia further explained:

There are a lot of relatively affluent...those kids have a lot of perks in their lives. They travel, they have everything they need, and their families are putting them in a lot of extra activities. (Amelia, 27-5)

Cool Guy echoed this idea: "The kids who go to Northern already have a leg up on being successful over an average student in a public school" (15-11). Interestingly, regardless of whether or not a parent acknowledged the existence of factors that could impede a parent's involvement, all saw parent participation as being a sign of a good parent.

While acknowledging that such factors could temper a parent's role, having stressful life situations were not adequate reasons for neglecting to participate in a child's education. Being involved is a benefit, cost, duty, and responsibility of the type of education offered by Northern (Colette, 18-6; Marney, 1-7). The study's participants used words like *important*, *dedication*, *care*, and *desire* to describe parental involvement, and were emphatic that, regardless of one's situation, if you care and if you are dedicated, you will find a way to be involved (Johan, 28-7). Unlike prior generations, it is no longer okay, to drop your children off and "expect schools and teachers to do everything" (Dannie, 23-8).

Parents seem to agree that a culture of parental participation helped everybody see the need to be involved. As Mr. See said, "If you don't have to invest in your school like that, it is very easy to drop them off" (25-6). Several Northern parents realized that not everyone felt the same way, and reflected on friends who are happy with regular public schools and are not engaged in their children's learning. Laurie stated, "There is nothing wrong with that" but perhaps revealed her true feelings when she added, "it depends on what you want for your kids" (24-11). Overall, parents saw their involvement positively impacting their children's motivation and support (6-5; 11-8), but Douglas cautioned that parental involvement was not the cure-all: "no matter how much parental involvement you have, it is still up to the person" to learn and succeed (30-1).

Supporting the School Financially

Beyond parents' commitment of time at school and at home, families also contributed to Northern's success through financial support: "Northern does not have the luxury, if you can call it a luxury, of being able to [say] 'We get our check from the state

and we operate fully funded with public funds” (Mr. See, 25-7). Northern relies on financial support from families. As Douglas said, “The parents have given a ton of money. Without the money, the school would be an utter failure. So I suppose the parents are absolutely essential” (30-4). Lily noted:

Even though parents are working, and there are divorced parents, and single parents with single incomes, the school still finds a way to have so much parental [financial support]. Without it you would be up a creek because of funding. (9-7)

Monetary support provided by parents includes fees to pay for students’ school supplies, donations to cover the 20% difference in public funding (see next paragraph), and contributions to the capital campaign for the purchase of a school building. Though the school is a public school, and thus free, “We still have to pay a price.... I have to pay an extra \$185 next year for my 4th grader’s trip” (Juli, 29-12).

While schools often require families to provide some funding support for school supplies and special learning excursions, charter public schools in this northwestern state also have a funding shortfall, in that charter public schools receive approximately 80% of the per-pupil funding that regular public schools receive. Parents reported this difference to be between \$500 and \$1500 per child, per year. While parents were not particularly clear on why the schools received less funding than their regular public school counterparts, the state’s charter legislation is clear. Charter public schools:

...Receive their funding primarily from State sources. Charter schools also receive some funding from the federal government and a small amount from local sources. They do NOT receive any funding from property taxes. (A short course, par. 2, 2010, emphasis in original)

The reason behind the lack of property tax revenues is the fact that charter public schools do not have a neighborhood of residence that they pull from, like regular public schools do. Thus, it would be extremely problematic to calculate what tax revenues a charter

public school would receive (A short course, 2010). Regardless of the reasons for the reduced funds and the actual amount of the shortfall, parents conveyed the school is:

Essentially asking you to make up the difference. Fundraising, flat out donations...we don't care how you do it. The expectation is that everybody helps out at whatever level they can. (Rose, 16-6)

For the most part, parents were not critical of Northern for asking for financial support, but were critical of the state for not fully funding charter schools, indicating that it stacks the deck against charter public schools.

Parents perceived that "A lot of charters are failing because of funding" (Mzee, 7-11). Due to the funding difference, "You have to have some kind of fundraising to cover operating costs. That's why Geysers Charter isn't around anymore" (Synthia, 11-4).

According to Douglas, Northern is an exception: "[It] has come and made that work and probably made up more than the difference. But a place like Community Charter is never going to make up that percentage" (30-5) because of the demographics of families choosing to enroll. Not all charter public schools have the high level of support Northern has, and, as Synthia explained, "charter schools are public, so you aren't required to pay at any of them" (11-5). At Northern, donations range from \$40 to thousands of dollars (e.g., Pedro, 19-7).

Lily, a parent who had children at both a private school and at Northern, compared the fundraising auction events at both schools:

[Teresa's Private School auction is a] huge gala, it's amazing the money that is pumped into that school. Northern is more of a public school, not the same income that some [private school] parents have, but it isn't the money, it is the *time*. (9-6)

Lily continued, "Northern doesn't have the fancy donations like at Teresa, but it is the creativity these parents donate...Northern is very creative" (9-6). Comparing the funds

raised at her previous school, Juli indicated her PTO would use traditional fund raising, and be lucky to make \$15,000 for the whole year, while at Northern, they made \$100,000 at one auction. She reported that one parent put down \$3,500 for a sunflower portrait: “I like to donate and stuff like that, but [at Northern,] we are working with a lot of people who have a lot of money” (29-11).

Outside of the actual monetary benefit to the organization, a large positive byproduct of providing monetary support is having a deeper feeling of commitment and responsibility to that which you are donating. As Clementine explained, the school communicates: “What we want from you is your involvement. Whatever you can give us....” and as a result, “People feel attached to something they give money to. If you are donating money to something, you must care about it” (21-6). Speaking of that commitment, Synthia said, “I had a good understanding before going to any charter school that as a parent you really need to ...be committed to it and you need to give that support” (11-4).

During interviews with the nine parents who switched their children from private schools, I asked if private school tuition engendered commitment from parents. Clementine responded, “No, because if you pay too much you feel like you own it” (21-6). She continued, “If [I] pay too much, I will feel like it is my place; but I need to pay something so I don’t expect it is a free ride and [I am] doing you a favor by being here” (21-7). Additionally, parents who came from private schools may feel even more inclined to donate to Northern, given their savings on tuition: “We did contribute in the early elation of not having to pay [private school] tuition” (Pancho, 10-7). As Rose said,

“Financial help is fine. We came from private school. [I] can see if you came from the public school it would be a change. We don’t feel pressured” (16-6).

Many parents felt that Northern was the kind of community where people would step up to help those who were not able:

Like the snowboarding [activity]—there was a fee for that. It wasn’t a huge amount for us, but for someone else, it might be a financial strain, or impossibility. Northern is a place where ... people will step up for those who can’t afford it. (Ginger, 2-6)

There is a balance between those who contribute a little, and those who contribute a lot, similar to the balance between parents who volunteer a few or no hours and parents who spend time at school every week. Participants identified a perspective that everybody contributes what they can, a byproduct of Northern’s school culture that values everybody’s contribution equally.

Rather than utilize traditional fundraising methods, such as cookie dough, candy, gift-wrap, and door-to-door magazine sales, the Northern school community uses a variety of direct fund raising, including the twice-a-year auction, private donations from families, grants, and public donors. Elizabeth explained the financial needs of the school are communicated through bulletin boards, emails, family council meetings, and flyers (13-8). While Mzee perceived that the school sends “information out and then allow[s] families to come back individually, privately, anonymously” (7-7), Lucy perceived that her family was hounded by someone in charge of the capital campaign because their family had not contributed: “When you start making excuses to get someone off your back... We are being genuine. We aren’t [just] making excuses because we don’t want to spend the money” (8-5).

Thus, while every participant discussed financial support of the school, parents' feelings about and perceptions of fundraising efforts varied. Those parents who previously sent their children to private schools, or who worked for private agencies like daycares or non-profits, did not mind the fundraising efforts and regular reminders: "It doesn't bother me. I work at a place where people pay to send their kids" (Elizabeth, 13-9). Similarly, Crystal explained her family's circumstances:

It is tough; we don't have a lot of money. ... It doesn't bother me one bit, but I have been involved with other organizations that do fundraising. It is the nature of what has to happen. (12-8)

Some parents who came from regular public schools and were struggling financially perceived more pressure to contribute, and felt frustrated by continued requests for money. "They never said you have to give a certain amount. Give what you can. And that's what we've been doing" (Lucy, 8-5). With painful honesty, Lucy expressed her perception that her family's efforts were not accepted as enough.

As with involvement in the school, parents' perceptions of pressure and guilt in relation to financial contributions may be related to internal and external factors. When asked about perceived pressure, Synthia said, "No, I think they make it easy to contribute and they remind you of different opportunities to contribute and [we] contribute every month. But I have never felt pressured to do that" (11-4). Parents who are experienced in the nature of non-profits and necessary fundraising, even those who did not have a lot of money to give, didn't feel undue pressure, and gave what they could when they could. One parent experiences a great deal of pressure, but that may be related to her inability to contribute financially and be involved at the school due to several life issues. Given the

contributing culture of the school, and her inability to either participate at the school or contribute financially, she felt dual pressures (Lucy, 8-5).

Parents said they had donated “way more [to Northern] than at any other school” (Pedro, 19-5). But that has been okay because the expectation was clear from the onset (Ginger, 2-6), and “they are doing their job of reminding us that they need our financial support to make this program happen. They are good at explaining why, the shortfall in funding” (Rose, 16-6). In the end, most parents felt their financial contributions helped support a good program, and constituted a worthwhile donation (ex., Mzee, 7-7). Parents are “happy to pay what we can to make it a better place. I have friends who it is harder for. But Northern’s philosophy is give what you *can*” (Clementine, 21-6). As Crystal concluded, “We would open our wallets if it came down to Northern has to close. The payoff is pretty valuable” (12-8).

Increasing Involvement in Regular Public Schools

For schools, the payoff of parental involvement in time and finances is also pretty valuable, as parents talked about how increasing the parental involvement at a school could reap tremendous benefits for children’s learning. “If any school had the ‘buy-in’ of parent participation and involvement, they would be as successful as Northern” (Liam, 4-4). To increase the level of buy-in and involvement, schools would first need to perceive parents as having something to contribute. As Amelia explained, “At [our neighborhood school] a lot of the moms...it was me and a bunch of stay-at-home moms who didn’t work and a lot of them had never gone to [college]” (27-11). Continuing her explanation, Amelia summarized, “Maybe that’s why there was a push back. It was like, ‘You are just going to be in the room. I can’t really off-load anything that requires much of you’” (27-

11). From her experiences, Amelia perceived parents at Northern as having more to offer schools, from their skill sets, but that every parent had something to contribute if the school would provide pathways (27-11).

For schools to invite parents in, the administrators and teachers need to perceive clear boundaries and balance. Schools may not encourage involvement because it can have negative aspects for administrators and teachers. Marney felt that parent involvement gives teachers tools to serve students better, but it can also be a resource drain when time spent interacting with parents is added on to, instead of subtracted from, teachers' work loads (1-8). Thus, in order to utilize parents, the schools need to be organized and know how they can best utilize parents on site. Then, they can present the need, and welcome parents by providing on-site day-care and encouraging their involvement. Some parents may not realize they could be involved, so schools need to ask and encourage them (Elizabeth, 13-6). In reflection, Liam noted:

Parental involvement could be perceived as a bad thing, one of the breakdowns over the years in our education system. There is a schism between parents and schools, and Northern is pulling them back together. (Liam, 4-3)

Whether that schism originated with parents or schools, and whether it is political, territorial, or historical in nature, the schools alone have the power to bridge the gap.

Another aspect to improving parent involvement in other schools relates to the negative insider/outsider culture parents experienced as volunteers in previous schools. At Northern, parents like Juli felt welcomed and part of the culture, without any status tied to how much a parent volunteered or how much financial support they provided: "Any parent can fit right in here. They [even] have a Bible of terms" to help new parents learn the lingo and feel like insiders (29-13). That welcoming atmosphere is integral to

parent participation, according to Abbie: “Parents would get more involved if they felt valued and safe to do so.” Unfortunately, in Abbie’s experience, one of the problems in neighborhood schools is that “Parents are territorial and unwelcoming to new parents” (26-7). She used the phrase “Super volunteer club” to describe the clique of stay-home moms who seemed to control who got to participate and who didn’t (26-7), and saw Northern as having a structure that minimized the existence of such cliques.

Parents in this study revealed that social cliques in their former schools made working moms, who already felt guilt about not being involved, feel more like outsiders. When volunteering is a status symbol, parents coming in from the outside may find it difficult to find a way to be involved. As Jade said, in reference to transferring her son to a new public school, “We were out of the loop. I had nothing to contribute. Being a classroom parent, that spot was taken—I was just a junior mom!” (15-6). These parents emphasized repeatedly that the parent culture of Northern welcomed them from the outset, and that welcome encouraged them to be involved. The positive parent culture was seen as a reflection of the entire school’s inclusive culture and emphasis on giving back to the community and contributing. Parents felt that changing negative cultures would be an important step for regular public schools wanting to include more parents in schools.

As highly involved parents, these parents were motivated to seek out choice, and chose to send their children to Northern. They were the kinds of parents Hirschman (1970) theorized would be most likely to use voice to change things but also the most likely to use an exit option if offered one. In the course of our discussions, I asked

parents about public and private goods of education, and these conversations make up the next section of findings.

Recognizing and Struggling with Private and Public Goals of Schooling

Parents in this study perceived both a moral obligation to provide good public schooling for all children, as well as a moral duty to ensure their own children had the best education available. The moral obligation relates to the public goals of schooling, and the moral duty relates to the private goals of schooling. Being both parents and citizens, many parents felt conflicted about the private/public goals of schooling, while others felt no conflict, believing their parental moral duty came first.

Public Goal: Moral Responsibility for All Children

The idea of a responsibility, as a democratic society, to provide a public education resonated deeply with participants, who felt that all children should have access to a good education, regardless of circumstances, and rather than creating charter schools for everyone, we needed to improve the schools we have (Crystal, 12-8). As Crystal further explained:

I do think that is part of our moral obligation to children. Because they do not choose to be in a school that is not as effective, or to have parents that are not as interested. (12-8)

Liam felt similarly: “It is our responsibility to help them, to educate them. I believe the smarter we are, the more likely we will be smarter about how we live” (4-5).

Parents wanted, like Sage, to “be part of making [regular public schools] a good place for people to send their kids” (20-6), because, for children who do not have families with everything going for them or parents who are willing and able to choose better schools, “Everyone is entitled. Even the mom who can’t come to school because she is

working. Her child is entitled. Every child is entitled to a great education” (Clementine, 21-13). As a society, we have an obligation to improve those aspects of public schooling that, like summer vacation, “disproportionately affect poor kids’ achievement” (Colette, 18-5). In response to people who do not see problems in public schooling, Amelia spoke about schools that are struggling to educate the less fortunate: “I don’t think most people really understand what those schools and those kids are dealing with” (27-7).

In this study, parents clearly felt that public education was important, and expressed a belief best communicated by Crystal:

It is our moral obligation to improve education for the kids who don’t have those opportunities or don’t have that enthusiastic parental involvement. (12-8)

The question arose about what kinds of schools would fulfill that moral obligation. As Colette described:

We have an obligation to make schools the best we can. Should we charge enough [taxes] for the Cadillac version? That’s probably not fair. Make it at least a Honda Civic. Nothing fancy, but it gets you where you are going, efficiently. (18-9)

If basic schools are funded to the level of a Honda Civic, parents in better communities will continue to donate more and provide Cadillac educations for their children.

Explaining further, Colette said, “You can’t stop that, [but] the bottom line schools should be a good education” (18-10). She felt districts should pool monies and evenly distribute them among the schools, instead of the current distribution, which allows wealthier neighborhoods to start off with more funding and better schools.

Conflicts of Citizens as Parents

This belief in a moral obligation conflicted with many parents’ desires for the best education for their own children. These highly involved parents who contributed to their

schools and were often among a small handful of parents who were involved at prior schools felt guilt and concern for the schools and kids they left behind when they chose Northern. Ginger expressed this concern:

When we left our neighborhood school, we were a family that was invested in our neighborhood school. We cared about our community and we cared about our school and I felt like our leaving left a big hole. (2-5)

Similarly, Dannie stated, “I felt guilty when we left because there was nobody else doing this [being involved] and they needed more parental involvement at Matterhorn” (23-6).

These parents saw a need for strong families and students in regular public schools serving diverse populations:

There is this huge population of kids that are getting such a bad start as far as academics go. There is a tremendous difficulty in trying to bring up half the class or more. (Amelia, 27-9)

And teachers need the support provided by involved families. Sage summarized, “In deciding to leave, I felt like I had let these people [in public schools] down” (20-11).

For parents who desired an inclusive community, and who chose to live in neighborhoods with diverse demographics, choosing to leave their regular public schools felt like a betrayal of their beliefs surrounding the value of diversity (Dannie, 23-14). Jade felt it was difficult to initially take her son out of the public school system: “If we don’t support the public school system, what hope do we have as a society?” (15-14). The belief that regular public schools had something of value to offer that was being lost by attending a school of choice was best expressed by Dannie when she said, “We are no longer a part of that, our old school’s diversity, refugee families, Hispanics, wide economic range” (23-12). Sage felt sad that some “die-hard” choosing parents looked at regular public schools as an option that was less than desirable, instead of recognizing the

benefits of community, diversity, and social development provided by regular public schools (20-9).

In reference to most regular public schools, Mr. See said, “Oh, I think they are adequate. By and large, I don’t think they are breaking any records. They aren’t trying stuff that’s really different” (25-9). As a result, they meet the needs of most families.

Colette felt that, if Northern’s model of character education became the “norm,” it could cause discomfort for parents who didn’t want character taught (18-8). Liam explained another aspect of regular public schooling:

Regular public schools fit the masses. They fit the majority. That leaves the minority—someone like me... We can define minority in many ways. It could be a learning disability, a quirk, a tic, something that doesn’t work, or someone with a high IQ. (4-4)

Laurie observed that regular public schools are “failing kids who do not fit the mold. Can put kids who fit the mold anywhere and they will be okay” (24-1). This mold is what many parents referenced when they discussed their own schooling, and how they either found success because they fit the mold, or struggled in the system because they didn’t fit the mold.

Private Goal: Moral Duties as Parents

For parents with children who aren’t served well by the “good enough” education provided by their regular public schools, their parental moral duty to their children supersedes the good of the whole. The phrase “good enough” carries the idea that for the majority, most schools will work, but for some, most schools will not work. Looking back at parents’ motivations for seeking out choice, problems/concerns about lack of fit were a common motivator (See Table 4.9). As Liam said, “For us to believe or think that

our public school systems are going to fit everyone, we are not being good stewards of our society” (4-4). He continued:

Systems are in place for a good reason. However, systems fail populations. They fail families; they fail communities. If we are not a flexible system, you get fed up with it; you seek something else: private, charter, alternative schools. (Liam, 4-4)

Laurie agreed that having alternatives was necessary because “Every child learns so differently. One curriculum that works great for one kid, does not work for the other” (5-2). Perhaps parents who are more apt to choose are more sensitive to identifying when things are not working for their children, because, as Marilyn said, “When you pick a school of choice, you are picking it for a certain reason, a fit reason. All schools are not for everyone” (22-6).

Thus, the parents in this study perceived that they have a duty to provide their own children with the best education possible, and when their neighborhood schools are not able to provide that education, those parents who are aware of and able to access choices do so. But this creates a moral quandary for choosing parents. Pedro best summed up this moral dilemma of public schooling when he said, “That’s the struggle with parenthood. [As a] single guy, I was focused on the public good. As a father, I need to provide for my girls. My job is to advocate for them” (19-7). Sage, a parent deeply committed to the public goals of education, concluded, “I am taking care of my own kids. At this point, my obligation to my family comes first” (20-6).

Considering that his moral duty to his own children took precedent over any moral obligation to society, Mr. See said:

I care about our kids. I don’t care if Pierce is broken or not. That’s not my job to fix it. My job is my kids and the peer group they are with. I don’t have time to deal with that over there. It is not my problem. (25-9)

Mr. See felt his most important contribution to the public good was raising his children to the best of his ability. Others expressed they didn't feel they had a choice to focus on one or the other. In response to Crystal's comments about moral obligations, Rose said:

I really like what she had to say there. I wish I was more focused or had a better ability to help make that happen. But I can't think beyond my own children. I think it is very hard to do both. (16-8)

Talking about her family's decision to pay for private school, Rose said, "I never in a million years thought that I would be [sending my kids] to private school...But I feel so strongly that if I don't do it now, where are we going to be later?" (16-8).

While many parents agreed that providing an exit option through schools of choice would encourage active, involved parents to leave failing schools, they did not have an answer for remedying that, including Johan, who said, "I don't know what is the best method, because you don't want people stuck there if they can't [choose]" (28-8).

The immediacy of a parent's duty, which cannot be put aside while enacting change through voice and effort, can be heard in Clementine's words:

Children are not dry goods you can put on a shelf for a while. Every year you send them off somewhere, something is happening to them, wasting, spoiling. (21-11)

Additionally, the use of choice as a vehicle for school improvement was called into question:

You have to allow families a way to get out...Choice is a way to keep those people who would *leave* regular public schools *in* public schools. But it isn't a way to *improve* the regular public schools. (Amelia, 27-9)

Amelia's words give voice to another major theme that emerged, School Improvement, which is further discussed in Chapter Six.

Marilyn spoke again about the moral quandary of choice: “If there were bussing and breakfasts and lunches and after school care, then yes. But we do have these issues. Some kids really don’t have a choice” (22-10). In our conversations, as we wrestled with these issues of duty, obligation, and equity, many parents spoke about the children who do not have a choice. Those parents who are not involved, for a variety of reasons, are not choosing different schools, thus their children are at the mercy of the quality of their neighborhood school. Choice is somewhat of a luxury. For example, choice does not work for parents who can’t transport their children to a different school (Marilyn, 22-10). We could provide lots of choices, but for some parents, where their child goes to school will always come down to convenience (Marilyn, 22-10).

As illuminated in Chapter Four, the mechanisms of choice further ensure that some families don’t really have a choice. Information about choice is passed on through social circles and word of mouth, which is, as quoted earlier:

Not fair for everybody. Limits to a certain crowd, a certain group. Limits to a clique. A group of women who pass it on to friends and their friends. What about people who need a new idea who aren’t getting the word of mouth? (Lucy, 8-4)

Additionally, choice draws resources away from schools that are already “under funded financially and parentally” (Cool Guy, 15-14). Private schools may draw resources from regular public schools, in that the families who can afford private school are no longer contributing time and money to their neighborhood schools, and schools of choice remove another layer of energy and investment, leaving those schools that are not being chosen “stuck” with the parents who have the least to offer. As Marilyn explained:

For some families, the hardships encountered in sending kids to Northern is similar to the commitment and sacrifice it would take other families to send kids to a private school! Certain families can’t make it work. (22-10)

Similarly, families who are not aware of or able to access choices are left to hope that their regular public school is adequate:

The people who are struggling to get by are probably the people who are not able to make the choice. If they are not able to make a choice, then...hopefully they live in an area with a nicer school. (28-8)

This counters with parents' perceptions (noted earlier) that parents who do not choose schools may be satisfied with their schools. Perhaps it is both—regular public schools include families who are not able to choose other options, as well as families who are satisfied with the education the schools are providing.

Some parents indicated the schools and students left behind, those not chosen and not choosing, would stagnate, because the families aren't involved:

I think maybe it is the middle that might get left...the ones who don't know anything or that there's an option.. Don't know anything different. Then you get people who are strapped, financially, and they are so concentrated on how to make the next meal work that they can't even think about their children's education. (Ginger, 2-6)

For kids with specific learning needs that are not addressed by the school, if they don't have parents advocating and choosing for them, "They end up in jail. They drop out of school. They don't ever change" (Jade, 15-13). As a result, some un-chosen schools become repositories for second language learners, refugee families, and the poor, all who are either unaware of or unable to access choices (e.g., Johan, 28-8).

Uniting the Public and Private Goals of Education

For most parents, improving regular public schools so that involved parents felt their children's academic, social, and emotional needs were being met was the best solution, because schools would then be good enough for all children, regardless of parental involvement. If, as Amelia alluded, choosing parents have a higher parental

sensitivity to education options, schools that met the needs of choosing parents would be more likely to meet the needs of all families (7-1). The potential for all children came through in Crystal's words:

Wouldn't it be exciting if the public school, for a child that didn't have what our daughter has at home as a support group or willingness to try...wouldn't it be nice if they got it at their neighborhood school? (12-5)

Also championing regular public schools, Colette said, "Compulsory public schools are important for public goals and align with my own private goals" (18-8) and that "diversity, acceptance, and tolerance are important, socially" (18-8), further adding, "Taxes should pay for schools—we all benefit from having an educated populace" (18-9), and supporting the link between democracy and schooling.

Unanimously, these parents felt that Northern, and other public schools of choice, provided a model of how regular public schools could fulfill these goals and ideals. At Northern, "staff, teachers, and other parents do whatever they can to provide a really good, safe environment for every kid, no matter the parent's involvement" (Ginger, 2-5), and every school could do the same. Uniting public and private goals to address the needs of a diverse populous is not easy, and will take "a societal shift. We can really judge how healthy our society is by how healthy our education system is" (Liam, 4-5).

Chapter Four focused on parents' views on choice, including characteristics of choosing parents, motives for their choices, and issues related to equity and access of choice for all families. This current chapter examined parents' perspectives about parental involvement, including changes in involvement, how schools are impacted by parental involvement, and how schools of choice may be self-selecting for involved parents, thus setting themselves up for even more success. The public and private goals

of education, and how these intersect with parents' moral obligations as citizens and moral duties as parents, emerged as a rich narrative that leads the way to discussing school improvement in Chapter Six, where the themes of choice and parental involvement come together as parents reflected on how school choice intersects with school improvement, including which components of Northern's curriculum, philosophy, and way of doing school can be brought into regular public schools, and how choice can be used as a vehicle for school improvement through modeling and competition.

CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS—OUTCOMES OF CHOICE

Reflecting on Choice

Participants in this study selected Northern for a variety of reasons, including recommendations from members of their social networks, the specific curriculum and pedagogical focus, and dissatisfaction with how their children's schooling was going. In the first part of this chapter, parents reflect on the outcomes of choice, and how their children fared during their first year at Northern. In the second part, parents share their ideas for what regular public schools could learn from Northern, in order to improve their educational offerings. As part of our discussions, parents often talked about why schools wouldn't borrow from Northern's model, which connected with Tyack and Cuban's (1994) grammar of schooling (See the "Choice Has Worked" section in Chapter Three). The final portion of this chapter shares parents' supports and critiques of advocating choice as a vehicle for improvement.

Reflecting on their children's experiences at Northern brought parents back to their reasons for choosing Northern in the first place, and moved parents beyond those initial reasons. Most parents' expectations and/or needs were well met. Parents who felt forced to make a choice due to financial reasons, life circumstances, and changes in their schools perceived fewer positive outcomes, but they concluded overall positive results from their choice decisions. For parents with children who were struggling academically and socially, they perceived tremendous positive outcomes, far beyond their expectations. Those parents who came to Northern not because they were necessarily unhappy, but

because it seemed like a good opportunity were also highly positive about the outcomes, though also quite surprised by all that Northern did provide, like Mr. See, who didn't know anything about expeditionary learning, but perceived it as a "game changer" for his kids (25-6). Participants discussed outcomes of their choice decisions that related to the curriculum and pedagogy of the school and the community focus of the school, as well as outcomes that were not as positive as they had hoped.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Several aspects of Northern's curriculum and pedagogy stood out for parents in this study. In addition to the focus on community, culture, and team building discussed in the following sections, parents spoke about the expeditionary learning model, in which students delve deeply into a topic that integrates multiple subject areas, is interactive, incorporates a more global approach, and supports the having of deep, wonderful ideas. As Pancho and Esmerelda both explained, "Northern has broad scope brush strokes, and a depth and pushing of thinking beyond the surface (10-5). Additionally, students are accountable to do their best work through revision, coaching, peer-response, and expectation (Crystal, 12-4). Summarizing the value of the expeditionary learning model, Amelia said, "Integrating curriculum is more effective at challenging kids, across the spectrum.... [The] hands on aspect...works with a variety of learning styles and a variety of levels" (27-9), thus supporting the needs of a diverse range of learners within the regular classroom.

According to parents, both the culture and curriculum of Northern give more students an opportunity to thrive: "They so strongly push that everyone is equal, that everyone has value, that everyone is good at something, [that] there is no one student

better than another” (Marilyn, 22-3). As a result, more kids find success at Northern, because it is how children should learn: the way Northern classrooms are run is “respectful of little nervous systems that are developing. Respectful of a huge range of development” (Sage, 20-8). While this school does not target certain learners, Marney perceived that Northern gives kids who might otherwise be swept under the rug a chance to find their potential and thrive (1-5).

Parents noticed a wide range of learners succeeding at Northern, including Jade, who described her experience working with a literature group, where she saw that “Everyone participated, everyone had a turn. They were thoughtful and kind to one another, even the ones who were shy, unprepared, or fidgety” (15-13). Similarly, Mr. See said,

I think any kid who goes there, regardless of their parent’s involvement or lack of involvement, will do better at Northern. Any kid, without regard. There is absolutely a wide range there. (25-8)

These parents contradicted the notion that charter schools cream or skim the best students from regular public schools.

Meeting the Needs of All Learners: GATE, General Education, and Special Education

An academic concern exists in public schools for students who qualify for Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) services. In the course of these interviews, five parents reported their own experiences with GATE in elementary school, eight indicated their own children were in GATE, and an additional six parents discussed GATE as an issue influencing schools and education, though their own children did not qualify for GATE services. Amelia perceived fewer GATE students would enroll in Northern after members of her GATE-parent social circle questioned why she would remove her

daughter from a full time GATE program to attend Northern. Her perception adjusted during our conversation after she learned of the high number of GATE students who enrolled at Northern (See Table 4.2).

Reasons parents of children receiving GATE services chose to enroll their children in Northern included being concerned about the social groups in the GATE classes, an emphasis on test taking, competition and parent ego trips, and not wanting kids to feel too special/important or too different. As Anna said, it was time to break her son out so he could “have a different experience and hopefully have a different learning opportunity, too” (14-4). Expressing similar concerns, Mr. See bluntly stated: “Some GATE kids are not socially well-adjusted—they are quirky and weird. The classic nerds who get beat up because they are different” (25-4). Johan, talking about his family’s reasons for not accepting their former school’s offer to put their son in GATE, said they had concerns that GATE classes ended up segregating and separating kids: “We didn’t want him to feel special or different. [Didn’t] want him to think he is better than others or have an inferiority complex” (28-10).

Parents of non-GATE children had insight into how GATE programs impacted general education classes as well as entire schools. A parent who transferred her children from JFK to Northern, Juli spoke about the vocal group of GATE parents who pushed the district to house all of the GATE services on the JFK site, and how that push impacted non-GATE programs that no longer had physical space to exist, such as the yearbook club and the arts program (29-3). Johan, another JFK parent, questioned why teachers pushed for testing kids for GATE, eventually concluding it may have been a way to support those parents’ push for consolidation of services (28-4). With several parents, I

discussed whether the push for GATE qualification was a way to keep parents who would seek out other options, a way to help them feel they are getting a 'better' education, as the schools' demographics changed. Several parents observed how vocal parents of GATE students were in the district (ex., Jade, 15-12; Mr. See, 25-4), and thought that those parents might be the ones who would exit if their children were not getting served. Teachers were also perceived to be a part of the GATE fanaticism: "GATE teachers go crazy because they think they have a genius in their classroom" (Juli, 29-4). Because the teachers treat the GATE students so differently, and say they need enriched environments in order to be academically satisfied, parents start to think "their children are so very special, more special because they are smart" (Juli, 29-4).

As a result, among the parents interviewed for this study, parents of non-GATE students often perceived that GATE students got better educational opportunities than general education students at regular public schools (e.g., Juli, 29-5). As Jade commented, "Smaller classes should be for kids who need extra help, not the smart ones!" (15-6). Clementine, who saw their old neighborhood school as segregated by a GATE program, said it was like two different schools on one campus, and the GATE classes received more funds, more field trips, etc. In the end, she felt, "The general education folks feel [shortchanged]" (21-2).

At Northern, however, parents of both GATE and non-GATE students perceived that the whole general education program was more like the GATE programs at regular public schools. The investigations, learning expeditions, and community-based curriculum program are all supportive of the needs of students who require expanded academic opportunities. Northern's general education program met Mr. See's family's

expectation that it would “be like GATE, but all the time, for everybody—inclusive, not pull-out.” (25-3). A parent of a student who was in a full-time GATE program, Anna said her son, who had always completed his work easily at his previous school, was doing better with Northern’s way of doing school and he was finding more challenge (14-5).

The theme of GATE coincided with the theme of SpEd, in that both groups of parents appreciated Northern’s policy of integrating special services into the regular classroom. As Jade said, “Don’t we all have special needs?” (15-10 Jade). A physical therapist that worked with kids in schools, Sage perceived that pullouts and separation, be it for positive or negative reasons, make kids feel different, and, “It is hard to be different”(20-4). Reflecting on Northern’s approach, she said:

The model respects the differences in kids more. I see, in very traditional classrooms, kids who have sensory needs and there is not a lot of room for that. You [have to] make up jobs for movement, rather than it just being okay to get what they need. (Sage, 20-9)

Continuing on a similar thread, Abbie indicated that, at Northern, kids had the ability to get sensory needs met throughout the day (26-8).

Besides environmental fit for kids, the model implemented at Northern also provides a better academic fit: “Everyone gets more. It is easier to get accelerated, challenged if needed, within the regular classroom” (Johan, 28-10). Mzee noted similar observations, saying, “Everyone is getting the same curriculum, they are just running at different speeds” (7-8). Laurie identified it as differentiated learning, and with her two children requiring special services, one in SpEd and one in GATE, she perceived both of her children getting their needs met in Northern’s general education classrooms (24-8).

In combination with differentiated instruction, Northern’s emphasis on team building plays a large role in helping all students participate actively in their learning

communities. As Juli said, “They are all a piece of the puzzle.... Everyone has a part to play” and no one can ride off the coat tails of the group (29-7). Juli perceived this as especially important for students receiving special education services: “Those kids need to be integrated into the classroom. They need to feel a part of a team” (29-9) because they often feel like they have nothing to contribute, and as a result they become bystanders to their own learning. This has been a huge change for her son, who is now participating in class, “at his level, but at everyone else’s levels, too. He feels part of the group” (29-9) instead of feeling lost and sidelined.

Focus on Community Building

The benefit of community and the school’s theme of being part of a team instead of going along for the ride echoed among parents’ discussions of the benefits of Northern’s way of doing school. Parents perceived the benefits as stretching far beyond academics:

One of the biggest appeals of this school...there’s a whole child that needs to be addressed, not just the academics.... There’s this academic side that is important to us, but the character thing is also important to us, and some of the things they are being exposed to. (2-3)

Northern’s emphasis on character goals and character development is part of the reason some parents, including Crystal, selected Northern in the first place. Dannie spoke about the greater value of the lessons her daughter was learning:

Learning how to be a good person, that will help her in her experiences in life. It will reveal itself in her education. If you can’t learn how to get along with others and give to the community, the education behind it isn’t going to be useful. (3-11)

For Anna, who struggled with confidence and speaking up in her own schooling, she saw her children open up with Northern’s approach: “When they have community

circles and having people contribute their ideas...there is no right or wrong, we just want to hear what your opinion is” (14-5). Marney saw a similar outcome:

The community aspect, and how much the work that they do as a class, talking about community and talking about their classroom and those relationships is invaluable to them. (1-4)

To illustrate the impact Northern’s emphasis on community had on its students, Abbie shared what her daughter said one day as they drove into Northern’s parking lot and saw the announcement for the upcoming enrollment lottery on the school’s marquee: “Mom, even if you won the \$1.45 million lottery, I would still want to go to Northern because they make me want to do things to help the world and my community” (26-3). The students at Northern feel that they are part of making their community a better place, and they are not waiting until they become adults to make things happen.

Given the number of parents who were motivated to seek out school choice for bullying and social issues, it isn’t surprising that the school’s emphasis on community and team building relieved parents’ concerns: “Our son has had zero issues with bullying... There is no kid there who behaves the way any kid did in public or private school” (Cool Guy, 15-13). Having a positive social atmosphere benefits learning, as Elizabeth explained: “If you are in a place where you are comfortable and everybody is friends, it’s easier to learn” (13-3). Clementine also perceived benefits coming from the mixing of families from different neighborhoods across the city, in that children gained better perspectives: “It is healthy for kids to see that not everyone shares the same reality” (21-12). Just as many parents perceived that it is healthy for children to experience adversity, as described in the next section.

It's Not All Roses...

Parents did perceive a few concerns about their children's experiences at Northern, some due to issues related to the school's growth (Liam, 4-2) and some due to children's adjustments to changes in their learning and home lives (Rose, 16-3; Synthia, 11-7). Amelia's daughter has not had the academic challenge she had at her former school, but Amelia feels that her daughter is benefiting from so many other aspects of Northern, and that the academics are secondary. "If we were focused on her academic development, we would not be as satisfied" (27-6). Parents talked about the things they gave up, by coming to Northern, including Libraries, arts and music programs, and sports. However, even with these issues, all parents felt their selection of Northern was a positive one, and well worth the effort: "Even with the piece I found disappointing, I am very happy" (Synthia, 11-11). As Abbie indicated, you can't have everything, so what you are getting out of your choice decision must outweigh what you are giving up or what you had (26-10). Pedro concluded, "The main impetus is just that this is a place that feels like it is going to create a joy and a kind of love of learning for my children" (19-9), and that outweighed any shortcomings of the school.

The ability to acknowledge and accept both positive and negative aspects of schooling is a characteristic of middle-class parents revealed in the literature (Gorman, 1998; Rätty et al., 2004; Rätty & Kasanen, 2007). In this study, parents spoke about problems their children had as a result of less-than-ideal teachers, at a school known for a strong teaching staff. Clementine said her daughter:

Is learning she has to speak up for herself and take initiative. You don't get what you want, always. She isn't being challenged, she's bored, but she will be okay. We all have one or two of those teachers in our life, and it doesn't ruin us. (21-4)

Similarly, Liam's son's class is not as positive as they would have liked, but "He is learning other lessons. Sometimes you don't connect with someone, and you have to come home, or you have to deal with it" (4-4).

Expressing clearly the flexibility of middle-class parents as described in the literature (e.g., Gorman, 1998), Clementine said she valued "the ability to realize that, you know, we aren't all that special" (21-13). In a similar vein, Laurie emphasized:

It doesn't matter if I don't think [teachers] are doing everything exactly right. I am one parent out of all the parents. No teacher can cater to your child. As a parent you have these expectations and they are never going to be met. (24-6)

This comment came from a parent who had experienced years of struggles in her search for appropriate educational placements for her children, yet she still accepted the positive and negatives of public schooling. Another parent expressed similar views when talking about her daughter getting the one "bad" teacher:

This year I learned about letting go. So maybe the school doesn't fit you in every single way, but you let go because they are getting a good education from people who care about them. (Clementine, 21-12)

Despite running into disappointments, these parents remained committed to their choices, and perceived the overall benefits outweighing any concerns. Their ability to roll with disappointments may be tied to choice. Would they have been as flexible if these events had occurred in their regular public school?

Perceiving Northern as a Model for Other Schools

Based on the positive benefits of Northern, including its philosophy about character and contribution to community, as well as academics and learning structures that supported diverse learners, I asked parents if Northern's model could work in a regular public school. Overall they felt schools could benefit, if staffs were open to

improvement, perceived success as an opportunity to learn rather than a threat, and were interested in understanding the reasons parents left. Pancho hoped that administrators could look at Northern's success, as measured by test scores, and that:

It would occur to them that what they are trying to do isn't very successful... There are a lot of aspects of Northern that could be included that could be more successful than the grind. (10-9)

The participants in this study noted freedom, buy-in, leadership, teacher culture/training, curriculum/pedagogy, parent involvement, and supportive structures as components of Northern that should be considered by schools wishing to improve. These ideas are all well represented in the literature on school improvement (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Fullan, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007), but a few deserve further explanation.

An aspect of choice that most parents felt had valuable repercussions for schools is the commitment that comes from buying into a school's mission and vision through choice. At Northern, "There is a very big commitment that the parents have. I don't know that that would always be a possibility with most schools" (Pancho, 10-6). The nearly unanimous perception of commitment engendered by choice was best expressed in Liam's words: "If any school had the 'buy-in' of parent participation and involvement, [it] would be as successful as Northern" (4-4). Besides the buy-in of parents, you also need the buy-in of teachers, as Mr. See explained: "They started with a different model. They hire based on that model" (25-7). Hiring for change is easier than making changes with existing staff, due to the importance of teacher buy-in, and their ability to impede change through resistance (Marney, 1-4).

Buy-in builds on Northern's commitment to creating a highly trained teaching staff, with regular time built into the school's schedule to allow teachers to work together.

As Clementine said, “Training and teaching is not something you leave to chance” (21-5). The participants in this study wanted to see more regular public school teachers being music conductors, instead of dictators (Crystal, 12-6), but, as Jade explained, in order to teachers to be conductors, they need to have the tools to understand how kids work (15-3). Building on Jade’s conductor metaphor, Cool Guy mused that, for some kids, “The conductor can’t read the music!” (15-13). As a rule, teachers need training in order to be responsive to students needs and work with where kids are, not where textbooks and curriculum guides want them to be, and an increased investment in teacher training can mean that teachers will be more in tune with students, they will have more fun, and kids will actually learn and remember things (Lucy, 8-8).

For schools to improve, increasing parental involvement was seen as a necessary component by most parents in this study, who recognized the tremendous contribution and value of parents at Northern, as well as at other successful schools: “When you have high parental involvement, you have a good end result” (Mr. See, 25-6). Parents like Amelia felt that increasing parental involvement had the potential to turn schools around:

You can have a really crappy school, and if you have parents that are going to make sure their kids are stimulated and they are always there and always helping, those kids are going to do well. (27-10)

Many of the successful components at Northern rely on parental involvement because that involvement can take the pressure off of teachers and free up time they can spend “to figure out what they need to do to help different students and personalize things” (Johan, 28-6). In order to increase involvement, schools need to “set up an environment where parents can be more involved” (13-4). Elizabeth indicated that improved communication was a key component to this environment.

School Choice as a Mechanism for School Improvement

Without question, all of these parents were satisfied, if not outright thrilled, with the outcomes of their choice decisions, and they perceived many aspects of Northern that would translate successfully to regular public schools. However, when asked if regular public schools would, or could, improve, parents were less positive. Some parents, like Laurie, hoped that over the long term, the competition provided by schools of choice like Northern would “play out to be a good thing for our regular public schools for the kids who don’t have a choice, or their parents don’t make that choice” (24-11). Laurie continued, “Maybe competition is good and it will help bring [regular public schools] up to level” (24-11). Market forces take time to work, and the effects of choice and compulsory schooling may make the impact of competition less effective. In addition, those compelled to try and make a difference in their schools often meet a “brick wall of bureaucracy” (Sage, 20-11), which further encourages exit as an option.

The Mechanism of Choice

When pondering the question of school improvement, Juli said, “I think in all your interviews, I think you have answered your question. I think [the solution to successful schools] is choice” (29-15). In her eye, schools of choice were better schools as a result of being chosen, and the act of choosing in turn influenced parents to be more involved. However, public schools that are also schools of choice may benefit disproportionately from being schools of choice. As Cool Guy explained, “Students are selected for success, and Northern gets the benefit from that” (15-11). He described Northern’s student population as “lopsided towards success, especially when you compare it to [regular] public schools” because the strongest, most academically inclined

parents and students, which are already being drained into GATE, are being drained further into charters (15-11). Similarly, Sage felt, in regards to those schools that are not schools of choice: “If smart, educated people don’t choose to send their kid to a school, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. That school is not going to be a good school” (20-6). With choice, it may be that “we are creating parallel schooling systems” (Marilyn, 22-10).

Participants also spoke about negative effects related to free public schooling for all children. As with democracy and the right to vote, compulsory schooling gets taken for granted and people become complacent (Sage, 20-11; Juli, 29-14) because “it’s a public school and I get to go” (Clementine, 21-11). Solutions to the dilemma of complacency included making changes to funding, similar to voucher plans, and making choice compulsory because “Out of pocket costs and tax costs are not the same” (Mzee, 7-8). As Mr. See explained, parents “are not paying for the real costs. You aren’t controlling it; you aren’t looking at it. You pay your taxes, but you are not writing a check to the school” (25-9). To remedy this, Mr. See suggested changes similar to those needed to improve the insurance industry: “People need to spend real dollars and make a true market choice. Until then, status quo. Nothing will change” (25-8).

In Juli’s words, choice is a mechanism that can break down the “day-care, compulsory nature of schooling” (29-14), and get parents involved. Anna, a parent who also advocated choice as a solution, wondered, “If everyone chose to go to [their neighborhood school] would that make the difference? If school wasn’t a *have to* but something they chose?” (14-8). She combined the ideas of vouchers and choice, believing a combination of choice and involvement would resonate with parents’ sense of moral duty to find the best fit for their child (14-8) and lead to greater participation in schools.

Many parents felt, like Colette, that “Moving away from cookie cutter schools to many schools of choice” (18-9) would be a positive for public schooling.

Choice Improves Some but Not All

Since these participants were all parents who had made school choice decisions, our conversations naturally turned to whether school choice could be a vehicle for school improvement. These parents were conflicted. While their experiences with choice had been quite positive, they recognized choice was a double-edged sword:

You have to allow families a way to get out...Choice is a way to keep those people who would *leave* public schools *in* public schools. But it isn't a way to *improve* the public schools. (Amelia, 27-9)

Talking about which schools would improve, Johan said:

[Choice] probably helps out the schools that are already doing well. It may not be as beneficial to some of the other schools. People chose not to go to certain schools and that probably drops their numbers, but it also might give them Title 1 funding. (28-7)

Thus, school choice may be a selective force for school improvement.

Other parents called the notion of choice improving schools “baloney,” including Amelia, who said:

There are people who are strivers. They want the best. They want to get the complete education. They are very critical about weighing things against each other and they select. They choose to live in a neighborhood because they want the best. That's what you have at Northern. They choose what they think is the best solution for their child. (27-7)

Also expressing concern about improvement stemming from choice, Pedro determined:

Seems opposite. If you have those involved families in the public schools that are then able to go to Northern or another charter school with those expectations, you are kind of losing some of that culture from the public school—the involved folks. (19-6)

Ginger agreed, sharing that many public school teachers she talked with felt that “many of the kids they would love to have in their classrooms are being pulled out to the charter schools” (2-5), which refers to the concern about creaming found in the literature (Barrett, 2003).

Colette reflected that choice was better than nothing because waiting lists encouraged more schools to develop, and it would help with the shift, but it was not the be-all, end-all of school improvement (18-5). Choice, without other motives, would not drive whole-scale improvements across the board. Two ways that school choice advocates predict improvement coming from choice is through competition and modeling (Hoxby, 2000; Lubienski, 2003). In the next sections, parents reflect on both mechanisms.

The Market Force of Competition

The market force of competition, fueled by choice, is often proposed as a way to improve regular public schools. Through competition for students, and thus dollars, schools will improve. These parents expressed concern that the schools competing for students were not the schools that most needed to improve:

JFK is competing with Northern for some of the GATE students and some of the other students. One of [JFK's] teachers said they were afraid of losing too many of their GATE students. (Johan, 28-7)

Johan knew of 4 families who left JFK for Northern. Abbie believed competitive forces were most applicable in neighborhoods with older, more affluent families. She was not sure if it would work in neighborhoods where families did not have the time, flexibility, and finances to make choices work: “They can’t leave, so will the school ever improve?” (26-8).

To illustrate this concern, Abbie shared her perspective on what happened at Tennyson, which was located in a neighborhood where families had higher-incomes and more educated parents (26-8). When the school's leadership took a negative turn, these families left to other schools of choice, using open enrollment, charter public schools, and private schools. A new principal who came on board "made it her charter to bring back enrollment and bring back all the people who had fled to other schools. Now Tennyson has a waiting list for K. It took 8 years" (26-7). Abbie felt that Northern, as one of the big draws for families, helped drive the change at Tennyson (26-8). Clementine, a parent who moved from Tennyson's neighborhood to avoid sending her children to the school, also pointed to Tennyson's changes as an example of competition pushing improvement (21-7).

An educator employed by City District, Douglas described the effects of open enrollment on schools: "Since schools are open enrollment, every school now pretty much has to fight for students because it is all about the numbers" (30-3). He felt that schools needed to come up with ways to retain students through programs that would attract students and parents; "Some sort of program that separates itself out from the other schools and makes it unique" (30-6). Sage advocated for schools using their unique characteristics as billing points, rather than detractors, to put a positive spin on the opportunities different schools' cultures afforded families (20-11).

Provision of Models

The other way schools of choice are supposed to improve regular public schools is by providing models of success that schools can then adopt or adapt. Five parents cited the example of a regular public school that was going to be shut down for low enrollment

(e.g., Synthia, 11-9). According to Anna, the district decided to use a model that was highly popular as a charter school, and utilize it to increase attendance at this poorly performing school (14-7). Within a year or two after its conversion, the school had to start holding a lottery to distribute the limited number of openings among the interested families. The school district took something that was successful as a charter school and adopted it, trained the teachers, and used the model to success in a regular public school (Anna, 14-7).

Other parents pointed to a new charter school that was opening up in the fall of 2010, indicating it was started by parents who could not get into Northern (e.g., Crystal, 12-10). The charter's focus on community and parental involvement is similar to Northern's, but with a different curricular focus on arts and sciences. This school supported Rose's thought on how models could improve schools:

If there are schools of choice and you have families flocking to those schools of choice, wouldn't the other schools look at the model then and adapt some of what they are doing? So they could still stay in existence? (16-4)

Indeed, models may provide incentive to change:

[Without choices] people would be stuck. Nobody is going to grow; nobody is going to change if they don't have to. What forced Tennyson to get rid of a principal? Unless you have some model pushing the envelope, people don't really like to change unless something forces it. (Abbie, 26-9)

Models may also serve to open the envelope and help parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers think outside the box in regards to the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1994, 1995). Speaking about this, Abbie said,

Northern is like Apple computers. It is something very innovative, it connects people, it builds community, and it is changing the way people think and forcing the other competitors to change. (26-9)

Mr. See agreed: “Northern is one of the outliers. It is breaking the model, it is not doing things exactly the same” (25-10). In order for models to change the status quo, interested parents must be clamoring for change, and insiders must be acting as “intermediaries who can get in there and say hey, have you seen what they are doing? Why can’t we do that here?” (Biff & Muffy, 17-9).

Open Enrollment

Another aspect of school choice that impacts regular public schools is open enrollment, in which families can enroll in other schools within a district, as long as the school has room. As mentioned earlier, parents spoke about how open enrollment offered choice to families, but perhaps not direct incentives for schools to change. Some parents felt that open enrollment was creating elite schools within the regular public school system. Parents in this study who either accessed schools through open enrollment for their children, or worked in the school district reflected on the changes wrought by the policy.

Speaking about schools that were not chosen through open enrollment, Sage explained that the “District busses kids to Pierce due to the exit of [families] to open enrollment and other choices” and that the students being bussed in were coming from lower-income neighborhoods where families had more stressors (20-2). Tennyson, another school in the district that lost many families to schools of choice also had to bus students in. When this school improved and Tennyson’s neighborhood kids started attending again, the children who were being bussed in went to other schools that needed enrollment. Thus, the improvement of Tennyson did not seem to improve the educational opportunities for kids who attended schools not attractive to open enrollment, and the

parents most attracted to open enrollment are those who have those positive characteristics of choosing families (discussed in Chapter Four) that benefit both schools and children's learning.

JFK is a school with a long open enrollment waiting list. According to a parent who used to send her children to JFK:

[It] is the only school [in that section of town] that is not a Title 1 school. That's why people flock to enroll their kids...it is a better school than most of the other schools around. The other schools are low-income, free breakfast, free lunch. JFK has never qualified because you have more of an upper crust going there. (Juli, 29-2)

Another former JFK parent also spoke about how open enrollment influenced the school:

[JFK] is in an older neighborhood with a lot of elderly people, so most of the students are open enrollment and choose to go there. So it is kind of an... I don't know if you want to say an elitist school in the public school district? I would say probably half of the people who go there live in the boundaries. (Johan, 28-3)

Juli echoed Johan's description of JFK as an elite school, saying that, because of choice and selection, "You get a different ram of people" (29-2). JFK is a school of choice within a public district, and due to its location and demographics, it not only has openings for open enrollment, its demographics attract more families interested in open enrollment, so the school now has a long waiting list.

As described by the participants in this study, the issues of school choice and change are complex. While being strong advocates for choice, and deeply appreciating the academic, social, and personal growth and opportunities provided by charter public schools, open enrollment, and private schools, these parents overall questioned the ability of choice alone to improve schools. In the next chapter, the three themes of Who Chooses and Why, Parent Involvement, and Outcomes of Choice come together with the

literature to present the conclusions of this study: What can we learn from this school choice context?

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

In this concluding chapter, I present an overview of the study, and then share a summary of the findings and interpretations within the three main themes: Who Chooses and Why, Parent Involvement, and Outcomes of Choice. Next, I provide recommendations based on these findings, again organized by the three main themes. Following the recommendations, I share suggestions for future research, and a summary of the significance of this research. Finally, this chapter ends with the grounded theory that emerged as a result of this study.

Overview of This Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate school choice perceptions held by parents who chose to enroll children in a particular charter public school. Based on the literature review and exploratory pilot study, this research hoped to illuminate and illustrate parents' experiences, from their own schooling up through their children's current year of schooling, in order to better understand the issues surrounding school choice from the perspectives of parents who chose this particular charter school. Additionally, this researcher hoped a detailed case study on a school choice context would inform policy makers, educators, and others about the perceptions held by parents, who are the primary consumers of public school choices.

This case study includes 33 parents, representing 29 families that enrolled their children in a progressive charter public school in a large city located in a rural, northwestern state. Northern was a successful charter public school, in operation for over

ten years. At the time of this study, it had increased its population by 1/3, after moving to a larger school site purchased through donations, grants, and funds. The school uses a progressive, constructivist pedagogy and curriculum based on thematic study, integrated learning expeditions, community involvement, service, and extensive off-campus learning activities. Parent involvement, a cornerstone of Northern, is expected, encouraged, and reinforced. Enrollment applications exceed the number of available openings each year, thus, according to the state's charter statute, Northern holds a random lottery to assign interested families to a numbered waiting list for each grade.

Findings and Interpretations

Who Chooses and Why

As described in the literature, a main concern about school choice is who actually chooses schools of choice, and what lies behind those choice decisions. In this study, participants addressed three aspects of this concern: Demographics of Choosing Parents, Reasons for Choice and Learning about Choice Options, and Equity and Access to Choice for All Families.

Demographics of Choosing Parents

According to the literature, selection of schools of choice is tied to parents' demographics (Goldhaber, 1999; Maddaus, 1990), reasons for choosing (Martinez et al., 1994), and types of schools being selected (Hausman & Goldring, 2000; Garcia, 2008; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). The parents in this study supported these findings from the literature. This charter public school, with a constructivist, progressive pedagogy and a reputation for being a "good" charter school, attracted an older parent population with higher levels of education and income than might a regular public school. Parents

perceived that this school operated from a position of strength because it did not have to advertise to gain students; instead, it had a long waiting list and selected students through a lottery. As a result, any parents who did not fit with or agree with the school's philosophy and curriculum were free to enroll their children elsewhere.

As in the literature, middle-class families are more likely to access schools of choice with progressive, constructivist pedagogies (Chenoweth, 2009; Schneider et al., 1998). Also in the literature, middle-class parents are more likely to recognize, talk about, and come to terms with the positives and negatives they perceive in their children's education experiences (Gorman, 1998; Rätty et al., 2004). These parents did as well.

Reasons for Choosing and Learning About Choice

The literature on reasons for choosing called for examining reasons more in-depth, including Maddaus (1990). In this study, participants described many reasons factoring into their school choice decisions. Their primary reasons included attraction to the philosophy/curriculum, quality of learning opportunity, recommendations from within parents' social networks, and problems for children in current schooling, but their overall choice decisions were complex mosaics of influences. When asked to reflect on the outcomes of their choices, parents cited their reasons for choice, and the degree to which those reasons were addressed related to their satisfaction with the outcomes.

Social networks emerged as a primary vehicle for learning about and reasons for choosing this school. As indicated in the literature (Chung-Kai & Chia-Hung, 2009; Maddaus, 1990) and supported by these 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). The social circles they operate in tend to influence the schools they learn about. As a result, parents saw the families enrolling children at Northern to be more similar than different, perceptions that were supported by the descriptive statistics collected for this study.

Equity and Access to Choice

Perceptions of a lack of diversity among families at this school of choice also supported the social network theory of how schools of choice are passed on, and raised further concerns about equity and access to choice. Parents perceived many potential barriers for all families in learning about, perceiving as viable options, and accessing/enrolling in schools of choice. Potential barriers included physical/logistical (transportation, day care, schedules, technology), financial (supporting school financially, having money for transportation, relative freedom from financial stress), and life situation (work, time to volunteer, 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 can inform the literature.

Parental Involvement

School choice involves parents on two levels. First, parents must be involved to some degree in the choice making process. Second, many choice options encourage and/or require more involvement at the school site and/or at home. The findings for parental involvement are the most extensive in this study, perhaps due to the population of participants being parents who made choice decisions. Three areas of findings are

discussed in the following sections: A Symbiotic Relationship Between Schools and Parents as an Agency for Change; School Cultures, High Involvement, and the Guilt and Pressure of Expectations; and Parents Recognize and Struggle with the Private/Public Goals of Schools.

A Symbiotic Relationship Between Schools and Parents as an Agency for Change

Parents in this study perceived real differences in the levels of parental involvement experienced at different schools. They felt their involvement was necessary to the success of Northern, and that any school could be dramatically improved if it had the same level of involvement. Compared to their own childhoods, parent involvement had increased greatly, to where the definition of a “good” parent includes being involved in children’s schooling to a far greater degree than it did in previous generations. Parents felt the push back they experienced at previous schools was a major factor as to why they and their peers did not participate as much. This contrasted with the expectations at Northern, where they were utilized as a vast education support network in the school and at home, providing transportation, supervision, facilitation, and instruction, along with fundraising, financial support, and non-classroom related volunteering.

The literature on parent involvement supported the reasons for Northern’s success in soliciting parent involvement. Market theory assumes that parents who actively choose their children’s school will be more involved in their education than those who do not choose because they make a greater investment of time, energy, and fees usually associated with making a choice. This greater investment could lead to a sense of ownership of the school that psychologically encourages parent involvement (Bauch & Goldring, 1995).

Parents indicated that the school's capacity to be organized so that potential volunteer options were clear, diverse, and valued by all was necessary. As Fullan (2007) wrote:

Schools that have their act together have the confidence and competence to reach out to parents; schools that do not have these characteristics play it safe behind the classroom door and schools walls. (p. 194)

The multiple and varied ways of participation were seen by participants in this study as an acknowledgement on Northern's part that all parents were valued and that a particular set of skills or resources was not more valued than another. While parents did feel pressure to participate, they realized that Northern's school culture also supported various levels and amounts of participation. Valuing parents, reaching out to them, and expecting their involvement in a wide variety of ways are all crucial to bringing parents on board (Comer et al., 1996; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

Parents also perceived differences in how parents felt about involvement, and saw these differences connecting to demographics of parents, with families experiencing more stressors being understandably less involved than families with fewer stressors. In comparing the level of involvement at Northern with their prior schools, parents perceived that for their children to be successful at Northern, parents needed to be more involved at home as well as at school, and this was connected to Northern's curriculum. Considerations of family stressors and the pressure of the culture of the school to influence parental involvement were not addressed in the literature specifically, although allusions were made that families with less income, ELL, and SpEd characteristics were less likely to be involved (e.g., Wells, 2009).

School Cultures, High Involvement, and the Guilt and Pressure of Expectations

In discussing parental involvement, parents wondered if parents who were not involved did so by choice. Those parents in the study who were not able to participate to a level that met perceived expectations expressed guilt and discomfort. These parents, as well as many who were highly involved, identified more family stressors that impeded parents' involvement in schools, including finances, work schedules, and feeling a part of the school community. Because parental involvement is a significant component of Northern's school culture, not being able to participate due to a variety of factors can cause feelings of isolation and guilt, even though the school's community recognizes not all families can participate equally. Northern's capacity to provide opportunities to participate on varied levels tempers these feelings of guilt and isolation. The issue of guilt and pressure related to involvement was not reflected in the literature and may represent new information.

A question that emerged was whether parents in this charter school and other schools of choice were more involved because that is the nature of choosing parents or because the school expected and nurtured it. The literature reflected that choice engendered more involvement, and that schools that expected involvement and provided multiple avenues for involvement would have higher levels (Berends & Zottola, 2009; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Wells, 2009). At Northern, expectations, need, the school's culture of involvement, and a respectful use of parents' time contributed to the nurturing side of involvement, while parent characteristics that allowed them to be involved, a predisposition to involvement from the outset, and the act of choosing reflected the nature side of involvement. A symbiotic relationship between parents and schools emerged,

where parents bring an interest and commitment to being involved, the school needs and expects involvement, the need/expectation increases parents' commitment and involvement, which increases the school's and students' success. The literature reflects the importance of parental involvement as a resource for students and schools, and indicates that market mechanisms may increase parental involvement, especially for middle and upper-class families (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hausman & Goldring, 2000). The image of symbiosis that emerged from this study is much richer and more complex than any found in the literature to date, and may provide new layers of information.

Parents Recognize and Struggle with the Private/Public Goals of Schools

Parents in this study recognized both a moral responsibility for providing a good enough education for all children, as well as a moral duty to ensure the best education for their own children. These different callings created a moral dilemma for many parents, best expressed through their feelings about the schools they left behind when they chose Northern. Some parents felt a loss of what regular neighborhood public schools had to offer, in terms of community, diversity, and connection, while others lamented the unfairness of choice, in that their children were able to access the superior education provided by Northern through the luck of a lottery. Three parents felt that regular public schools were already adequate, and they did not feel any moral dilemma.

Though parents acknowledged the necessity of exit options provided by choice, because they didn't want to see children stuck in sub-par schools, they also expressed concern that choice was not an option for some children, by virtue of their circumstances, an issue also explored in the chapter on choice, where the mechanisms of choice act to limit those who have access to choice. This leads to schools with limited resources being

further limited, while schools with resources continue to grow stronger. While the literature reflects theoretical and philosophical concerns about moral obligations and potential negative impacts of choice, I found no studies reflecting parents' concerns, only teachers and philosophers (Goodlad, 2004; Levin, 2009; Meier, 1995).

Parents perceived one of the best solutions for uniting the public and private goals of education was to improve regular public schools so that involved parents felt their children's academic, social, and emotional needs were being met. This would ensure schools would be good enough for all children, regardless of parental involvement. Parents new to Northern recognized a moral dilemma between providing a good education for their own children vs. working to improve regular public schools for all children. This finding reveals a phenomenon yet discussed in the professional literature: parents who choose are not necessarily forgetting about the good of the community or removing themselves from the conversation surrounding school reform.

Outcomes of Choice

As satisfied participants in school choice options, these parents had mixed perceptions about the outcomes of school choice. Their perceptions are discussed in the following two sections: Superior Educational Opportunities and Changing the Culture of Schools.

Superior Educational Opportunities

The parents in this study do not see choice in and of itself as the deciding factor in school improvement. Looking back on the outcomes of their choice decisions, parents perceived this school to be a superior education opportunity for their children due to the curriculum and pedagogy, the school's focus on community and service, and their use of

methods that supported all learners within the general education classroom. Although parents perceived that many aspects of Northern's curriculum, community, and structures would be relevant and successful in regular public schools, they also perceived it to be unlikely that schools would change dramatically as a result of choice.

A barrier to improvement brought up in the literature is the grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1994, 1995), which I shared with some participants as part of our conversations. Those parents perceived the grammar of schooling to be a block, calling it "bureaucracy" and "the need to control the masses." Surmounting this grammar of schooling, including schools' perceptions of parents and parents' perceptions of schools, is crucial for school improvement, and is a frequent rationale for charter schools, which were created to spur innovation and movement away from the way schools have "always" been (Loveless & Field, 2009).

Changing the Culture of Schools

While schools of choice like Northern provide models for school improvement, parents did not perceive that schools of choice, and choice in general, would improve the educational opportunities for students who did not access schools of choice, an idea that reflects much of the literature on school choice (e.g., Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Goodlad, 2004). Without other forces at play, schools of choice will continue to divide schools into parallel schooling systems. Parents gave examples of choice driving improvement through competition and models, yet they did not see choice as being the primary mechanism that would improve all public schools. Instead, they saw it as a secondary tool.

The primary tool for improvement, according to this study, was changing the culture of schools through combining parental involvement with choice. Parents saw providing universal choice or a voucher system as a way to increase commitment and buy-in to a school (Levin, 2009). As participants said, there will always be parents who don't choose, or who choose the easiest, least stressful option. They perceived a societal responsibility to make sure those easy options provided a good education for all children, as reflected in the literature (Goodlad, 2004; Meier, 1995).

Recommendations

Returning to Levin's (2009) call to unite the public and private goals of education, and concerns that choice and the provision of an exit option are at odds with the goals of public schooling in a democracy, the recommendations stemming from this study seek to increase access to choice, increase parental involvement, and provide avenues for schools to use parents' voices and choices for the betterment of all schools for all students.

Who Chooses and Why: Equity and Access to Choice Options

The following recommendations are based on this study's findings related to equity and access to school choice options for all families:

1. *Increase equity of access to information about school choice options to reduce reliance on social networks.* Utilizing market forces necessitates using all aspects of market forces, including advertising. From an enrollment or private good of the school perspective, successful schools of choice do not need to advertise. However, from a diversity or public good perspective, all schools *should* advertise. Any publicly funded school should have free access to media disseminating information about schools of choice.

2. *Increase equity of access to school choice options by reducing barriers that could limit enrollment and attendance.* Families with multiple stressors are less able to flex with transportation, after school care, and different school schedules. To ensure all children have access to school choice options, schools and communities need to be diligent about seeking out solutions to the issues, as Northern did with the bussing and after school options provided by the Boys and Girls Club.

3. *To encourage diversity, schools of choice need to be intentional about soliciting participation from underrepresented families and expanding access to school choice options into new social networks.* Allowing information about schools of choice to be disseminated primarily through word of mouth and social circles means information becomes a possession of those social circles, and transference to new social circles is limited. Inclusive school and parent communities, as described in the next set of recommendations, may encourage underrepresented families to take the leap.

Parental Involvement: The Complexities of Families, Schools, and Democracies

The following recommendations are based on findings related to changing perceptions of parental involvement within school and parent populations:

1. *Schools hold the power to change the relationships between schools and parents.* Parents interested in participation need help to break down the historical and institutional barriers that block their involvement, and those parents who don't think about participation need an invitation and expectation in order to rise to the challenge. First, schools should examine and possibly

change their grammars of schooling surrounding parental involvement, in order to increase parent involvement through encouraging, expecting, and needing parents as partners in schools. Schools should first acknowledge that many parents' definitions of what "good" parents do has changed, and then schools must embrace this change by providing a wide variety of ways for parents to get involved, consistently communicating the expectation that parents will be involved, and fostering positive parent cultures (see next recommendation) so the cycle continues feeding itself. Teachers and administrators need to know how to best utilize parental involvement, so parents feel validated and staff members feel supported, not invaded or pushed.

2. *Parents should support each other as involved parents and create positive parent cultures within schools.* Northern's school-parent culture fosters involvement and community, and creates an atmosphere where all are expected to be involved, without extra status or weight given to parents who participate more or donate more. This is linked to the previous recommendations about schools changing their grammars of schooling about parental involvement. Parents should also change their own "grammars of parenting" surrounding schools, status, and parental involvement. Both of these recommendations should be implemented simultaneously, just as parents' needs and schools' needs go hand in hand.
3. *Unite the public and private goals of public schooling by recognizing and supporting the symbiotic relationships between schools' needs and parents'*

needs. This could resolve/lessen the moral dilemmas faced by involved, concerned parents as they struggle to access the best education for their own children without abandoning their moral obligation as members of society to provide a good education for the community's children. The recommendations in the following section are designed to meet these goals.

Outcomes of Choice: Giving Voice to Those Using Exit Options

The following recommendations are based on this study's findings related to utilizing school choice as a vehicle for school improvement by accessing parents' voices:

1. *Recognizing that families access choice for a variety of reasons, utilize in-depth exit interviews and use this information to dialogue with parents and plan for improvement.* This would fast-track the competition aspect of schools of choice by helping regular public schools identify what schools they were in competition with, and why. Parents would be given a way to exercise both their exit option through choice, and their voice option through the exit interview.
2. *To identify how family's needs were met, and to provide an avenue for dialogue about how to improve the school, schools should follow up with exited families.* This would fast-track the model aspect of school's of choice by helping regular public schools identify practices that successfully addressed parents' concerns and connect with resources and advocates who could help the schools make desired changes. This would, again, help bring parents' voices to bear on regular public schools, to meet their moral

obligations as citizens, while not negating their moral duty to their own children.

3. *Consider expanding choice options within multiple-school districts, where all parents choose a school at the beginning of Elementary, Junior High, and High school.* Upon enrollment in the district, each family is given information about all schools in the district, an optional appointment with a school counselor to help find a good fit, and a yearly opportunity to alter their choice decisions. The district provides bussing to all schools, after school care at central locations, and breakfast/lunch services. The commitment of choosing a school should reinforce parents' commitment and help break down the complacency of compulsory schooling. This should, in turn, feed the symbiotic relationship between parents and schools.

In summary, schools must, with intention, reach out to parents as the single most powerful and important change agent for school improvement. While choice in and of itself will not change regular public schools, combining the forces of choice, parental involvement, and the moral obligations and moral duties of all families and community members may be able to unite the private and public goals of education. This idea is reflected in the Carnegie Foundation's report on school choice (1992), which found choice to be a poor mechanism for improving schools. The report concluded,

The time has come, therefore, to move beyond the school-choice rhetoric and begin to shape a more comprehensive approach to school renewal—to search for common ground so all schools meet the needs of all children. So that every child goes to a neighborhood school that serves them well. (Carnegie, p. 76, 1992)

Eighteen years later, the participants in this study have come to conclusions that align beautifully with the Carnegie Report's recommendations.

Suggestions for Further Research

While the results of this study suggest many areas for further research, I have four specific recommendations within the areas of replication, new research, and pilot studies implementing the recommendations that emerged from the findings.

Replicate in Different Contexts

The results of this study suggest the need for replication in different school choice contexts, including charter public schools that serve different populations, open enrollment schools of choice, and regular public schools that have high levels of parent involvement and student success. Seeking out schools that serve diverse populations (as measured by F&R Lunch, ELL, SpEd, and Title 1 funding) that also have strong parental involvement is strongly suggested. Studies seeking to replicate this research should seek out families who were not successful in accessing choice, i.e. they did not win the lottery, and in finding families who accessed choice but then left after a period of time, to find out the perspectives of these sub populations of parents.

New Research: “First Initiators” and the Power of Social Networks

A new area for research could include first initiators who break into schools of choice from social circles that did not overlap with the school’s networks. How long does it take for a first initiator to result in new social networks being included within the school’s social networks? What does it take for a first initiator to bridge the gap? Are there characteristics of first initiators, or particular motives for choice that will push people outside of their comfort zones?

New Research: Grammars of Parental Involvement

A surprise from this study was how parent involvement and the definition of what a good parent does in relation to children's education has changed over time. This finding is worthy of a separate research tangent exploring the evolution of parents' identities and the grammars of parenting that may influence how parents from different backgrounds may view their relationships with schools, teachers, and learning, as well as how schools and parents may differ in their expectations of parental involvement's role in schooling.

Pilot Study: Implementing Exit Interviews

Longitudinal studies need to follow schools' parent cultures and levels of parent involvement over time, as schools go through changes in leadership, staffing, and budget. Using exit interviews, as well as follow-up interviews of parents who have accessed choice options, in order to help schools that are not being chosen use choice as a change agent. These pilot studies should help excavate the influence of the grammars of schooling and parenting, and how choice and parental involvement impact school improvement.

Summary of Significance

This naturalistic-constructivist inquiry utilized grounded theory to examine a constructivist question using qualitative and quantitative methods, resulting in this case study on parents' perceptions about issues surrounding school choice and school improvement within the context of one charter public school located in an urban center of a rural, northwestern state. The literature suggested that middle class, educated, employed parents would choose this school, and that choice acts as an exit option that triggers parents' private goals of education. School choice is proposed as a mechanism

for school improvement through competition and modeling, while some worry that it merely entrenches the status quo more. According to the 33 participants in this study, any child would succeed at this school of choice, but parents who are interested in and motivated to pursue choice at this school may be homogeneous along traits of education, income, age, and occupation, making them more able to pursue choice. Additionally, a parent's social circles limit access to information about schools of choice.

Study participants expressed concern about children who were not able to access choice, and felt it is our responsibility as citizens to ensure that all schools provide a good education for all children regardless of their parents' involvement, though parent involvement has become part of this current generation of parent's definition of what a good parent does. While they agree that school choice options need to be available in order to ensure that parents and children are not stuck in sub-par schools, they felt that the force of choice needed to be further augmented by making choice universal, through district choice plans or voucher systems, and changing schools to encourage, increase, and utilize parent involvement as a powerful, untapped change force. These two actions would reinforce themselves in the symbiotic cycle between schools needing help, parents wanting to be needed, and the intersection providing better educational opportunities for all students at a school.

These findings can be used by school choice proponents and critics to inform their conversations on school improvement, and can be used by stakeholders in schools, including teachers, administrators, and parents, to improve their schools through choice and parent involvement. Finally, school improvement policy makers and theorists can use this information to move forward in the debate surrounding school choice.

Recommendations for further study include replicating this study with schools of choice that serve different populations, with regular public schools that have high levels of involvement, and with schools that are open enrollment schools of choice.

Grounded Theory

The purpose of this naturalistic-constructivist inquiry, utilizing methods of emergent-grounded theory, was to construct a theory about school choice through hermeneutic dialect with participants. The grounded theory outlined below was constructed with 33 parents of children enrolled in a charter public school.

Public schooling in a democratic society meets both private and public goals. Parents seek to meet their private, moral duty to their own children without abdicating their public, moral obligation to all children. School improvement can address parents' dual goals in two ways. First, increasing parent involvement drives school improvement because parents can enact change through their efforts, without needing to exit. To increase involvement, schools must alter their grammars of schooling to reflect changing definitions of good parents, and they must support the development of positive parent cultures. Second, increasing equity and access to school choice drives improvement because parents can communicate their concerns through exit when their voices are not being heard. Schools that are being exited need to learn why families choose to exit and follow up on the outcomes of those choices. Increased access to choice and increased parent involvement in schools will reinforce themselves in the symbiotic relationship of schools needing help and parents wanting to be needed, resulting in better educational opportunities for all students, not just those with involved, choosing families.

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APPENDIX A

Instrument: Interview Protocol

Interview Date: _____ Pseudonym: _____ Child's Age/Grade: _____

Guiding Questions: “What are the relationships between social class, elementary education experiences, and school choice decisions?” “Have parents' experiences at this charter school influenced their perceptions of a 'good' elementary education??

Turn on Voice Recorder

This is Emily Gibson. It is _____, 2010, and I am in _____, with _____, for an interview for the study on parent perceptions.

Before we begin, I have some verbal paperwork to take care of, if you don't mind. First, did you review the informed consent forms? Do you give your consent to be interviewed? May I tape-record your interview? May I use quotes from your interview, under pseudonym?

1. To start out with, I'd like to hear about your own experiences in elementary school. On your survey, you indicated you attended a _____ school. What was your elementary experience like for you? What are your lasting memories/impressions?
2. As a former teacher in a charter school, I'm always curious to find out how families learn about different options. What's the story of how you came to Northern? (How far away is Northern from where you live?)
3. Your child/ren has/have been at Northern now for almost a year. I'd like to hear about how things have gone for your child/ren. How do their experiences compare to their prior education? (What, if any, changes have you seen in your child/ren? To what do you attribute these changes/growth?. Have there been any struggles? How do you, as a parent/guardian, feel about your choice of this school?)
4. In your survey responses, you said Northern was (not different, somewhat different, somewhat similar, very similar) to your own elementary experiences. Has your association with Northern changed or reinforced your perspective on what an elementary education should be?
5. I know some charter schools have a reputation for necessitating a lot of parental involvement. Can you tell me about your experiences, as a parent, in the Northern community? (Was parental involvement a factor in your decision to go to Northern?)
6. Do you believe any child, any family, could survive and thrive at Northern, or does it target certain populations or types of students/families? (Are there barriers to participation? Do you see a broad cross section?)
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your decision to enroll in this charter school?
8. Share prior constructions that have emerged and get participant's responses.
9. Is there another new parent who might have a different viewpoint from the ones emerging in these shared constructions?

APPENDIX B

Pilot Study Outcomes and Influences on Dissertation Instruments

status and Free & Reduced Lunch eligibility, and question 13 examined another facet of the school comparison. .

In order to incorporate the rich findings from the pilot study into the dissertation, I adjusted any demographic information to reflect any differences, related to questions that were added or changed. For example, in Table 4.1: Occupations of Parents in Home, I did not access occupation information for all of the adults in the pilot study families. Thus, the total number of occupations reported reflects the adults in all but four families.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol for the dissertation evolved as a result of the pilot study. The questions added were all topics revealed during the pilot study interviews. The themes that emerged in the pilot study were integral to the grounded theory that resulted from the study. Using strike-through and italic, I have indicated any changes that were made to the pilot study survey as a result of the pilot study.

Pilot Study Interview Protocol

Interview Date: _____ Pseudonym: _____ Child's Age/Grade: ____

Guiding Question:

“How do parents who engage in choice perceive the outcomes of their choices benefiting their children?”

(Turn on Voice Recorder)

This is Emily Gibson. It is _____, 2010, and I am in _____, with _____, for an interview for the pilot study on parent perceptions.

Before we begin, I have some verbal paperwork to take care of, if you don't mind.

First, did you receive the informed consent forms?

Do you give your consent to be interviewed?

May I tape-record your interview?

May I use quotes from your interview, under pseudonym?

Thank you.

1. To start out with, I'd like to hear about your own experiences in elementary school. On your survey, you indicated you attended a _____ school.

~~What was that like for you? What was your elementary experience like for you?
What are your lasting memories/impressions?~~

~~2. How far away is Northern from where you live? (Lead in to....I'd like to hear a little about why you chose to enroll your child at Northern)?~~

2. As a former teacher in a charter school, I'm always curious to find out how families learn about different options. ~~How did you learn about Northern?~~ *What's the story of how you came to Northern? (How far away is Northern from where you live?)*

3. Your child/ren has/have been at Northern now for ~~over half~~ *nearly a year. I'd like to hear about how things have gone for your child/ren. what, if any, changes you've seen in your child/ren? How do their experiences compare to their prior education? (What, if any, changes have you seen in your child/ren? To what do you attribute these changes/growth? Have there been any struggles? How do you, as a parent/guardian, feel about your choice of this school?)*

~~4. To what do you attribute these changes/growth?~~

4. In your survey responses, you said Northern was (not different, somewhat different, somewhat similar, very similar) to your own elementary experiences. How has your association with Northern changed or reinforced your perspective on what an elementary education should be?

5. *I know some charter schools have a reputation for necessitating a lot of parental involvement. Can you tell me about your experiences, as a parent, in the Northern community? (Was parental involvement a factor in your decision to go to Northern?)*

6. *Do you believe any child, any family, could survive and thrive at Northern, or does it target certain populations or types of students/families? (Are there barriers to participation? Do you see a broad cross section?)*

~~7. How do you, as a parent/guardian, feel about your choice of this school?~~

7. *Share prior constructions that have emerged and get participant's responses.*

8. *Is there another new parent who might have a different viewpoint from the ones emerging in these shared constructions?*

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your involvement with Northern this year?

Parental involvement emerged as a topic during each interview, despite the fact that no question asked about parental involvement, hence the addition of question 5 on parent participation. Furthermore, a participant's musings at the end of the first interview prompted the asking of question 6: "Do you think any child, any family, could survive and thrive at this charter, or does it target certain populations or types of students/families?"

The original question 3 did not flow during the interview, and needed a lot of clarifying questions. Those clarifying questions were restructured into the revised protocol. By including more follow-up question suggestions in parentheses after each main question, I was able to respond to participants more effectively when they needed clarification or more information.

The revised protocol better reflected the purposes of emergent-grounded theory, and provided opportunities for sharing prior constructs with participants to get their input.

APPENDIX C

Reflexivity/Reflection Summary

Keeping a Reflexivity Journal

When I began my dissertation research, I dutifully started my reflexivity journal, as described in my qualitative methods courses. My first entries were written from an outsider's perspective, cataloging my activities and thoughts as I prepared for the early interviews of the pilot study:

Feb. 27 Contacted my first parents. Hit me hard, the reality of this study. I am talking to real people, with real kids, who have struggled with making decisions about their kids. (Reflexivity Journal, Feb. 27, 2010)

With my first memo after the first interview, I began to realize the actual importance of keeping a research reflexivity journal in order to keep my research transparent and to lay a clear audit trail:

One thing that bothers me is the clearly middle to upper-middle class SES of the first five parents. I want to talk to some people who aren't in that bracket. ...I am left struggling with the "so what." of this study. Why is this important? Don't we already know that the middle-class is more likely to make choices? (Reflexivity Journal, Mar. 3, 2010)

Preparing for the defense of my comprehensive evaluation, I wrote about the ethics of my research, how outsiders would perceive what I was doing, and whether my findings would be misinterpreted:

I am nervous about sharing my findings. I am afraid that people aren't going to like what I have to say, even though it isn't a slam against anyone. It is what happens with schools of choice. What am I finding that concerns me so? I am finding that yes, this school of choice attracts a certain type of family. Why does it attract? Who? How? Will anyone admit it does so, or do they try to make it seem otherwise? (Reflexivity Journal, Mar. 6, 2010)

Then, after completing the pilot study and defending my comprehensive evaluation, my committee asked me to explain my research paradigm and methodology: what exactly was I doing, and why? Thus began my deeper journey into naturalistic-constructivist inquiry and emergent-grounded theory, in which research reflexivity is not

just a hoop to jump through to prove you are *doing* “qualitative research,” but a vital, integral part of the actual research process—the instrument through which the researcher catalogs the hermeneutic dialect with participants and self.

Un-flinching Honesty and Transparency

I began this study strongly biased towards choice as a positive force for improving equity and access to quality education for all learners. At the end of this study, most of my pre-conceived notions lie scattered among the drafts piled under my desk (see next section for discussion of how they changed). Looking at the interviews and surveys from an outsider’s perspective, I could have made these data fit my notions. I could have walked away validating my ideas, and could have presented my findings without ever truly engaging in a hermeneutic dialogue with the participants. This seems to be one of the largest criticisms of naturalistic-constructivist inquiry: done poorly, it adds nothing to the research literature, and can actually reinforce stereotypes and “well, of course!” types of thinking.

However, done well, naturalistic-constructivist inquiry is as rigorous and illuminating as the best traditional research. The key lies in the transparency of the findings. If someone else can walk through the same data, and come to similar conclusions, I know I’ve done quality research. If another participant of another, similar context can read the findings, read the grounded theory, and see themselves and their own situation in the findings, I will know I have accurately represented both this situated context, as well as uncovered the subtle nuances which inhabit other, similar contexts. I find, reading through my reflexivity journal and thick file of memos written during data collection and analysis, that the themes emerge again and the threads of the final major

themes that eventually evolved into the grounded theory are present within the very first interviews and memos.

As I recorded my thought process in my reflexivity journal, I found that the more brutally honest I was, the better my research became. When I laid it all out on paper while each parent's words were still echoing in my mind, I could be a better conversationalist during the next interview, better able to speak with the words of those who had come before and connect their thoughts with this new parent's thoughts. It became an ongoing conversation amongst 34 people, with me as the hub.

Reflexivity made me a braver researcher. I was more apt to stay anchored in the conversation, instead of drifting outside of it as an all seeing, all knowing observer "collecting" data. Participants informed my thinking, and I in turn informed their thinking. In notes collected during analysis, I reflected on one of the main themes of the section on Who Chooses and Why:

Is it that information is passed on via social networks, or is it that people value, or listen and remember, information received via social networks? Thus, is getting information out into new social networks the key to expanding a school as an option for more groups? The idea of "First Initiators." (Reflection on Envelope, Nov. 3, 2010)

I think there is a direct correlation between the strength and depth of the themes and ideas that emerged during the analysis phase and the diligence with which I completed reflections and memos during the interviewing process. The more I reflected after interviews, and connected the current interview to the others that went before, the better the next interview was. It became almost scary at times, how participants would say things that added to the conversations of before, as if they had been listening in:

Wow. Interviewed a parent today, and without any prompting or questioning, she laid out the whole idea of schools of choice not being options for everyone, and what happens to the kids left behind. WOW. (Reflexivity Journal, May 17, 2010)

It was hard when a parent would say something that contradicted what parents had said in earlier conversations. It messed with the neat, tidy findings that we are programmed to find via traditional research. I kept returning to the model of a mosaic of realities, which helped me see the contradictory viewpoints as merely new facets on the multi-dimensional image of school choice in this context, as this memo on reasons for choices reflects:

Parents' perspectives on how this school is doing are closely related to why they came and where they came from. Parents who came from private schools view the private education for public price theme. Parents coming from traditional public schools, where they were dissatisfied, see many positives, at a stronger level. Parents who came due to a move, or due to financial difficulty (they didn't choose to switch, but when forced with a switch, they chose this school) are less satisfied. Still happy, but they are more likely to see issues—more likely to say the Emperor has no clothes! (Memo, May 10, 2010)

The more view points I gathered, the more sure I was that I was truly representing the perspectives inhabiting this context, and the more confident I was that I was truly *doing* grounded theory. As Charmaz (2006) wrote, “Without engaging in reflexivity, researchers may elevate their own tacit assumptions and interpretations to ‘objective’ status” (p. 132). Within naturalistic-constructivist research, there is no objective reality. *Everything* is subjective, and the reflexivity piece keeps that subjectivity front and center throughout the research process.

Confronting Preconceived Notions

Before beginning this research, I held many biases, which centered on four preconceived notions:

- Choice is a vehicle for school improvement.

- Charter public schools provide learning options for students who are not being served well by regular public schools.
- Charter public schools are necessary for improving regular public schools.
- Parents are necessary partners in their children's education and schools need to communicate more effectively with parents.

The first three notions changed so much, I barely recognize them, and the third emerged as perhaps the most vital component of the school choice equation.

As I indicated in Chapter One, during the course of my career, my dedication to educational equity and access has not wavered. However, my previous perceptions on how best to achieve equity and access have shifted as a result of this research. I no longer champion choice and charter public schools as motivators for improvement. I believe that choice and alternative educational settings to regular public schools are necessary to provide places where students who are not succeeding can find success, but I no longer believe that regular public schools will improve as a result of choice.

My perception that parents were an important part of the improvement equation has strengthened and evolved as a result of the hermeneutic dialect I experienced with these 33 participants. When I worked as a private tutor for families, I was called to provide input at students' individual education plan meetings and I was surprised at how schools and IEP meetings seemed from an outsider's perspective. Though I was a professional educator, I was representing the families and students as a private consultant, not representing the school. In this role, I felt what parents in this study described as the push back from school personnel. My presence at meetings was not welcomed as another voice to help meet a child's learning needs. Instead, I was seen as a potential threat and

critic of what the school or teacher was doing. My previous focus on families' perspectives on education and choice decisions has been deeply validated by this study and the voices of these participants.

During the literature review I came across Hirschman's (1970) theory of improvement in social institutions, and then Levin's (2009) extension of that theory into current school choice contexts. I felt that this was an important piece of the school improvement puzzle. When I shared this literature with parents, I expected them to identify with the private good aspect of public schools: their children's education. I didn't expect to hear the depth of parents' responses, which showed they had been thinking about these issues long before I came along to ask my questions:

Pedro talked a lot about the private/public good, and how a parent's focus is on the private good, even if they were focused on public good before having children. It's just how it is. (Reflexivity Journal, May 14, 2010)

My reflexivity journal became my tool for illuminating my biases and pre-conceived notions from the outset, but it was especially important in this area, where my expectations were not met.

I was genuinely surprised to hear parents making broad statements about moral imperatives, duty, obligation, and the need to unite the public good and private good of education. When I went home at night to write my reflections, there were times I felt downright giddy recording the beautiful language encapsulated in the interviews. These parents definitely inhabited Goodlad's (1997) words: "education and democracy are inextricably woven together" (p. 32), and challenged my one-dimensional, rather selfish expectations of what parents would say.

Grounded-Theory Emerges

During the final stages of the analysis and writing phases, it was like the grounded theory started to ooze out of my pores, even when I wasn't thinking about my research. While sitting in a Post Office parking lot a half-hour away from my computer, I had several insights into what data was telling me. So I grabbed a large envelope and covered it with the ideas crowding my mind before they escaped unrecorded:

I think this data has something to say about the loss some parents feel at leaving their neighborhood school, and how that is tied to the public and private goods of education, and how choice enacts the private good while sacrificing parents' participation in the public good. The allegiance to public neighborhood schools, and how pursuing choice in some way negates the value of the schools left behind. People identify with a school community. The loss of neighborhood schools equals a loss of identity. (Reflection on Envelope, Nov. 3, 2010)

As the themes coalesced into tangible mosaics, with each participant's contributions glistening like a jewel's facets, I still struggled to condense the different mosaics of the three findings chapters into a unifying grounded theory.

I read Charmaz (2006) again, and absorbed more of the process surrounding the construction of theories. I wrote many memos, and continued drafting the three findings chapters. Then, after a long evening of writing, I went to sleep but slept shallowly, transparently. At 3:30 in the morning, my eyes opened, I sat straight up, and knew that I had it. I could see it, the unifying theory, laid out as clearly as a blueprint. Afraid it would disappear the way dreams do, I eagerly sat down at my computer. The beginning sentences read:

Tying it all together. Could not sleep tonight, after working until 1:30 on the dissertation discussion chapter. Think I may have a vision of how it all comes together and what it means. (Memo on Grounded Theory, Nov. 6, 2010).

The next day, after reading what I hammered out in the wee hours of the morning, I sent it to two of my committee members with the attached note:

I am so excited! Have been up all night writing. I believe I have the story that this data tells. Wow. It all weaves together into a deeper theoretical understanding of how parents and choice intersect. It's kind of scary how beautifully it comes together! (E-mail to Professors, Nov. 6, 2010)

The resulting four pages of single-spaced type fueled the discussion section, and eventually emerged into the grounded theory of this study. Even reading this memo, three months later, my heart beats a bit faster, remembering how the words flowed out with effortless grace.

In the end, what especially struck me is how clearly these parents were able to illuminate the dilemma that Levin (2009) described:

If education was strictly a private good, then the market and universal choice would be the game. If education was strictly a public good, then public decision making and funding would rule. However, education is a 'mixed' good because it provides benefits both private and public. (p. 19)

Exactly. These participants nailed it: improvement is going to take a mixed process, both private and public, to truly happen. In Chapter One, I wrote:

Somehow, as institutions that provide both public and private goods, public schools must find a way to improve through both exit and voice, and allow parents to exercise both choice and involvement.

I am confident that the grounded theory created out of this study provides a way to satisfy both public and private goals, while ensuring that all children, regardless of their parental involvement, will reap the benefits of a free public education.

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Script

Recruitment script for Phone Calls to Schedule Interviews

Hello, this is Emily Gibson, from XYZ University. I am calling to speak to _____
(Name of parent/guardian).

(If parent/guardian is brought to phone, repeat above dialogue)

(When parent/guardian is on the phone):

Hello _____, is this a good time to talk for a minute?

(If no, ask for better day/time to call back)

(If now is a good time to talk):

Great. I am calling about the research project I am conducting. You indicated in your response that you were interested in participating in the study. Is that correct?

(If Yes)

Wonderful! Do you have any questions about the research?

(If person has questions about research, answer questions)

Are you still interested in being interviewed for this study?

(If no, *'Thank you for your time. If you change your mind, please let me know.'*)

(If Yes)

Great! I would like to interview you sometime during the following week (go to the next week if they do not have time available). Looking at your schedule, is there a day and time that would be best for you? The interview should take about 45 minutes, though it may take a little more or less time, so we should block out an hour just in case.

Now that we have a day and time, would you like to select a place for our interview, or would you like to come to the XYZ campus and hold the interview in my office in the Education Building? *(Offer phone interview if meeting in person is not realistic with their schedule)*

Okay, I have down that we will meet on _____, at _____ am/pm,
at _____(location).

If you need to reach me before then, please call my cell phone at [number], or email at [email address]

Do you have any other questions? (If yes, answer them).

Okay, I look forward to seeing you then!

Good bye.

Appendix E

Introductory Letter to Participants

Dear Parent/Guardian (*Real Names were used in actual emails/letters*),

I am a graduate student at XYZ University, working on my dissertation research in order to earn a doctorate. While volunteering at Northern this past fall, I became interested in doing research connected to Northern in some way. After speaking with [school director] and my research advisor, I developed a research project investigating parents' perceptions of how alternative school models influence students' growth. Specifically, I am interested in talking with parents of children who have already participated in schooling somewhere other than Northern, because they have a port of reference for reflection.

I received your name from [the education director], who thought you might be interested in participating in this study. As a participant, you would meet with me for approximately 45 minutes and talk openly about your child's experiences in elementary school, as well as your own elementary school experiences. This study is not an evaluation of Northern. Instead, this study seeks to inform school reformers of the subtle nuances, positive or otherwise, of school choice. All participant comments will be anonymous and will be shared in ways that will protect individuals' identities.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you want to learn more before deciding, please return the response form (below) to your child's teacher at Northern. If you prefer email, you may send your response to me at [email]. If you respond with a "No thanks," this is the last you'll hear from me. If you indicate a desire to learn more before deciding, I will call you to discuss the study, and if I receive an affirmative response from you, I will call you to set up a convenient time and location for your interview. If I don't hear back from you, I will send a follow up note in a week just

to make sure you received the information and have had the opportunity to consider participating. Your willingness to be involved with this study will not impact your child's schooling in any way.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to possibly talking with you more about this research!

[Contact information]

Research Response Form

Please return in the envelope provided. Thank you!

- Yes, I would be interested in participating in Emily Gibson's research study for her dissertation.
- I would like more information about this study before deciding.
- No, thank you. I am not interested in participating in this study at this time.

Your Name: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Best way to reach you: Phone Email Other: _____

APPENDIX F

Follow-up Email to Respondents

Dear _____,

Hello, this is Emily Gibson, and as you may recall, I am working on a research project on parents' perceptions on school choice. Thank you for letting me know of your interest and willingness to participate in this study! I am so happy I will be able to include your voice and perspective in this project.

I have been waiting for university paperwork to be complete before beginning the interview phase of this project. Looks like I will be able to start interviews the first week of May. Towards the end of April, I will be contacting you to set up an interview. I hope this will work well for you.

Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions before then--My contact information is below. n I look forward to talking with you soon!

Sincerely,

[Contact information]

APPENDIX G

Follow-up Email to Non-respondents

Dear _____

During February, I mailed research invitations to parents. I am following up with families to make sure they received their invitations, and see if they have any questions. If you did not receive the packet, please let me know. If you did receive the packet, you may remember that I am a graduate student at XYZ, working on research for my dissertation on parents' perceptions on school choice. I will begin interviewing parents the first week of May.

I would like to interview as many parents as possible, to get the most accurate picture of parents' thoughts and perspectives on school choice. I will need about 45 minutes of your time, and I am very flexible regarding where, when, and how we talk. We can do the interview in person, at a location of your choosing, or over the phone. Either way, you can pick the day and time that works best for you.

I would really like to include your perspective in my study. Please let me know if I can call or email you towards the end of April to schedule an interview in May. If you have the return envelope from my original mailing, you can still return the response slip via mail. Or you may email your response to [email address]

Thank you for your time, and I hope to speak with you soon.

Sincerely,

[Contact information]

APPENDIX H

Instrument: Demographic Survey

APPENDIX I

Table of Raw Data from Demographic Survey

Table I.1 Raw Data from Demographic Survey

Question from Demographic Survey	Raw Data				
	1. Gender	Male	Female		
	9	24			
2. Age	<30	30-39	40-49	>50	
	1	11	15	6	
3. Family Income	<\$30,000	\$31-60,000	\$61-90,000	> \$90,000	N/A
	2	6	9	9	3
4. Family Ethnicity	White	Non-White Ethnic Identity		Bi-Racial ^a	N/A
	16	8		3	5 ^b
6. Family's highest Education Level	BA/BS	Master's	Doctorate	Some College	
	14	6	6	3	
9. Years in Boise	<10	10-20	>20		
	7	12	10		
10. Participant's Elementary Ed.	Neighborhood Public School		Private School	Both	
	27		2	4	
11. Comparing Own Elem. Ed. to Child's Ed.	Very Dif.	Somewhat Dif.	A Little Dif.	No Dif.	
	10	8	7	6	
12. Comparing Own Elem. Ed. to Northern	Very Dif.	Somewhat Dif.	A Little Dif.	No Dif.	
	22	7	2	0	
13. Comparing Child's Elem. Ed Exper. ^b	Very Dif.	Somewhat Dif.	A Little Dif.	No Dif.	
	18	7	1	0	
14. Parental Involvement	Yes	No			
	29	0			
15. Child's Last School	Neighborhood Public	Private	Home school	Charter	
	17	9	1	2	
16. Expectation for Child's Education	BA/BS or beyond	Graduate School	College	Technical	
	10	9	14	1 ^c	

Note: Family Counts = 29; Individual Counts = 33; Non-White Ethnicity used to protect anonymity of participants. ^aBi-racial families included in Non-white family count. ^bQuestion not asked of Pilot Study participants. ^cOne family had different goals for two children, for total count of 34. Data for question 5 not included. Data for questions 7, and 8 not included due to open-ended variability of responses.

APPENDIX J

School Demographic Tables, Sorted

Table J.1 Percentage English Language Learners (ELL)

School	%ELL
Tartan	0.0
Geyser	0.2
Grizzly	0.3
Northern	0.3
Glacier	0.8
Matterhorn	1.0
Sidewinder	1.1
JFK	2.5
Charles Moss	2.7
Grover	5.8
City District K-6	7.5
Craters	8.9
Red Fir	12.8
Hoover	16.0
Quince	17.1
Michael Kelley	17.2
Johnson	21.1
Pierce	21.2
Willy Shafer	22.9

Table J.2 Percentage Free & Reduced Lunch (F&R Lunch)

School	% F&R
Matterhorn	1.2
Tartan	5.7
Geyser	8.7
Northern	13.9
Grizzly	15.3
Sidewinder	21.3
Red Fir	37.4
Charles Moss	40.1
JFK	42.8
City District K-6	45.7
Glacier	48.0
Pierce	60.3
Craters	62.4
Grover	67.0
Michael Kelley	72.0
Quince	79.0
Willy Shafer	80.0
Johnson	80.2
Hoover	82.9

Table J.3 Percentage Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)

School	% GATE
Johnson	0.3
Hoover	1.1
Willy Shafer	1.3
Geyser	1.4
Craters	1.4
Michael Kelley	1.8
Quince	3.1
Sidewinder	3.7
Matterhorn	3.8
Grover	4.5
City District K-6	5.5
Northern	6.3
Pierce	6.7
Charles Moss	7.8
Grizzly	9.2
Red Fir	9.4
Glacier	11.5
Tartan	16.7
JFK	17.1

Table J.4 Percentage Special Education (SpEd)

School	% SpEd
Tartan	3.9
Geyser	4.6
Grizzly	8.0
JFK	9.0
Sidewinder	9.6
Grover	10.0
Glacier	10.4
Hoover	11.4
Matterhorn	11.6
City District K-6	12.3
Quince	12.8
Northern	12.9
Craters	13.7
Willy Shafer	14.0
Pierce	14.1
Johnson	14.4
Michael Kelley	14.7
Charles Moss	16.1
Red Fir	16.7

Table J.5 Percentage Average Daily Attendance (ADA)

School	% ADA
Michael Kelley	93.4
Pierce	93.7
Craters	94.1
Red Fir	94.1
Glacier	94.3
Matterhorn	94.3
Willy Shafer	94.3
Geyser	94.4
City District K-6	94.5
Quince	94.5
Grover	94.6
Tartan	95.0
Grizzly	95.1
Johnson	95.1
Charles Moss	95.2
JFK	95.3
Hoover	95.6
Sidewinder	95.7
Northern	97.9