2-1-2017

The Racial Politics of Elementary School Choice for Black Parents Living in Brooklyn, NY

Shannon N. Allen

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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THE RACIAL POLITICS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHOICE FOR BLACK
PARENTS LIVING IN BROOKLYN, NY

by

Shannon Allen

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

2017
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Shannon Allen

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

The Racial Politics of Elementary School Choice for Black Parents Living in Brooklyn, NY

by

Shannon Allen

Advisor: Nicholas Michelli

Charter school proliferation has disproportionately affected Black urban neighborhoods and the debate about the relationship between racial educational equity and enhanced public school choice through charters has created dissension and discord in scholarship and across Black politics, educational organizing efforts, neighborhoods, and school communities. This study is an interpretive policy analysis of the effects of charter school policy on the elementary school choice preferences and experiences of twenty Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where charter schools are disproportionately concentrated. It was designed to identify disparities between the values and goals of school choice policy and the values, goals, and racialized experiences of Black parents engaging in school choice. Each stage of analysis compared and contrasted dominant narratives about choice and public schools with Black parents’ school choice narratives, which constitute an experience-based racial politics of school choice. The analysis identified common racialized challenges Black urban American parents confronted, regardless of class or ethnicity, and compared and contrasted their diverse responses to these challenges to conceptualize a Black standpoint from which to perceive the consequences, limitations, and promise of school choice policy.
Parents who participated in this study internalized and subverted dominant narratives about public school crisis and choice. They discursively valued private schooling over public while also acknowledging a cultural hierarchy of public schools wherein public schools like charters and traditional public schools located in relatively wealthier and Whiter neighborhoods were ascribed with far more symbolic exchange value than their public neighborhood schools. They perceived choice as a means of escape from neighborhood disadvantage related to concentrated urban poverty and what they believed to be their low-income neighbors’ cultural poverty. This finding is counter to the logic undergirding the charter sector’s choice to disproportionately concentrate charters in Black neighborhoods.

Parents also held a related generational belief and had internalized the dominant narrative of engaging in choice as good parenting, and perceived parents of children in private and public schools of choice as invested and involved and parents with children in their neighborhood public schools as ignorant, unmotivated, entitled, and/or uninvolved. Relatedly, they perceived choice as a means to join social networks of parents in culturally valued schools where parents have more capital, and further revealed assumptions of neighborhood cultural deficit and significant intra-racial, –neighborhood, and –school community social ruptures.

Parents also internalized the dominant narrative of the purpose of schooling as preparation for college and careers in an increasingly competitive global society and perceived school choice as a means to dominant cultural capital acquisition. That said, they believed that different classes needed different educational training to meet this end and demanded a diversification of educational models in their neighborhoods. Regardless of class, parents expressed a strong preference for “diverse” schools as a means to meet the end of dominant
cultural capital acquisition, a term that seemed to serve as proxy for Whiteness in most accounts. This finding challenges the concept of Black “self-segregation” through preference for and choice of ethnocentric school models.

Finally, some parents’ preferences shifted with social changes or school’s admissions policy or location changes, revealing that parents’ preferences are as unfixed and mutable as the school choice marketplaces they engage in. Further, many parents experienced choice as an iterative and ongoing process. While charter policy enhanced parents’ opportunities to escape and choose public and private schools, they did not find this to be a liberating, empowering, or equitable experience. On the contrary, parents found elementary school mobility to be a confounding, depleting, and guilt- and anxiety-ridden experience. These parents’ school choice stories are an urgent reminder that any reforms to charter school policy must be complimented with reforms to all elements of the public school choice marketplace and that they and their children would not have incurred racialized costs of school choice had any of the twenty parents who participated in this study perceived and/or experienced their neighborhood public school to be a reasonable option.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to begin by thanking Jean Anyon, my first advisor at The Graduate Center. I first met Jean when she presented her work to my Sociology of Education cohort at Teachers College. After reading Radical Possibilities and hearing her speak I was convinced that doctoral studies would be a meaningful and impactful pursuit if I could work with her. I had the honor of working with and being supported by Jean for seven years before she passed away in 2014. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from her, be invited to push her own thinking, and to have known her personally.

I want to follow by expressing my thanks for the faculty members who worked with me on my committee after Jean’s passing. I am grateful for Nicholas Michelli who generously took me on as his student and supported me through the end of this journey. Moreover, I owe great gratitude to the brilliant scholar Judith Kafka who took me on as a student late in the dissertation process and worked closely with me on revising my language and arguments in each dissertation chapter. I am also very grateful to the two other members of my committee, L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy and David Bloomfield, for their wisdom, critique, and guidance. Additionally, I am grateful to Wendy Luttrell for introducing me to Dvora Yanow’s (2000) methodology of interpretive policy analysis.

I am equally grateful for the community of educators and scholars committed to educational justice and equity that I found in the Urban Education department. My friends and colleagues in the program taught me so much and kept me centered through the process of being a graduate student, becoming a scholar, and persisting with this work despite the significant barriers I encountered along the way. I am grateful for my group of friends and colleagues
within Cohort 7 who worked with Jean and shaped, supported, and pushed my thinking in graduate courses: Nelson Flores, Rachel Lambert, Chris Johnson, Jeremy Benson, Mark Wolfmeyer, Edwin Mayorga, and Mariam Tager. I am eternally grateful for Liza Pappas’s friendship and example of how to be ethically grounded in the work of educational research and meaningfully engaged in a community of scholars. I also could not have completed this process without the additional support of colleagues in various writing groups over the years: Ivana Episet, Roberto Martinez, Kirsten Cole, Mikela Bjork, Kiersten Greene, and Amber Pabon. Dissertation work is ultimately a lonely endeavor, but this project was carried along by the collective support and inspiration I received from these friends and colleagues.

Finally, I want to thank my family, who took me in and supported me during my last year dedicated to writing this dissertation. I'll never forget my Dad nervously vacuuming behind me as I submitted my full draft to my advisor and my Mom’s proud presence as I defended my dissertation. Their doors and hearts were fully open, and this allowed me the great luxury of dedicating the majority of my focus and energy to data analysis and writing during 2016.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The term “school choice” encompasses a variety of public and private options including parochial schools, homeschooling, magnet schools, and Gifted & Talented programs; however, recently the term is often used synonymously with charter schools. Defined as privately managed public schools, charters are a market-based reform strategy that has been pushed to the forefront of public and political attention and investment. No longer a fledgling reform strategy, charters have received widespread political support and 64-percent of Americans approve of charters (Richardson & Bushaw, 2015). As a result, the national charter sector has expanded rapidly, with the charter percentage of publicly funded schools increasing from 3.1 to 6.6 percent and charter enrollment increasing from 0.8 million to 2.5 million students between 2003 and 2013 (Mead, et.al, 2015).

Moreover, charters have come to dominate public and political attention because they have also been a point of controversy since their origins in the early 1990s. Of all forms of public school choice, charters and vouchers are the most autonomous from publicly appointed governance despite receiving public dollars (Pattillo, 2015). Charter advocates argue that this autonomy allows for school-level innovations like extended school schedules that enhance charters’ ability to promote academic achievement (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004). On the other hand, while the first major charter proposal came from Albert Shanker, a
famous teacher union leader, national teacher unions have opposed charters because charter autonomy allows charters to hire non-union teachers and some charter leaders have taken an explicitly anti-union stance (Cohen, 2015). Other charter opponents are concerned about the negative effects of privatization, arguing that charters divert funding and attention from traditional public schools and that privatized governance displaces and disempowers students’ parents and community members (Ravitch, 2010; Lipman, 2013; and Fabricant and Fine, 2015).

Furthermore, politicians and popular media icons including the musician John Legend have controversially described enhanced opportunities for public school choice through charters as the “civil rights issue of our time” (Scott, 2011; Snow, 2016; Legend, 2011). This use of civil rights discourse is related to the fact that charters are concentrated in urban school districts, serving higher percentages of low-income, Latino, and Black students than traditional public schools (Mead, et.al, 2015; McKenna, 2015). Specifically, charter proliferation disproportionately affects Black families and neighborhoods, with Black students making up 28% of national charter enrollment compared to just 15% of traditional public school enrollment (Prothero, 2016).

Desegregation scholars are concerned that charters are exacerbating trends of racial resegregation (Kuscera and Orfield, 2014; Frankenberg, et.al, 2011). Further, they posit that “color-blind and market-based educational policies and programs” like charters have overshadowed other forms of choice designed to promote voluntary racial integration such as magnet schools (Kuscera and Orfield, 2014, p. 22). In opposition to this stance, choice and charter advocates argue that contemporary racial educational equity must be premised on
providing people of color with enhanced access to quality schools, regardless of student demographics (Barnes, 1997; Stulberg, 2008, 2004). This debate about the relationship between school choice and racial educational equity has emerged within a context of longstanding concerns about the poor quality of public schools serving Black urban neighborhoods, the Black-White achievement gap, and high rates of racial segregation and isolation that have persisted over 60 years since the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Brown vs. Board of Education decision.

Market-based forms of school choice are also contentious issue across Black leadership, revealing a significant heterogeneity of Black public opinion and political behavior (Pattillo, 2015). Black politicians like New York’s Senator Bill Perkins and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) publicly oppose charters because they create segregated opportunities within school buildings and neighborhoods and an unequal playing field for all children for the benefit of some (Santos, 2011; Medina, 2010). On the other hand, Black leaders of organizations like The Black Alliance for Educational Options and Democrats for Education Reform publicly support charter sector expansion, dismissing the above critiques as ideological and class-privileged positions of people of color who do not share low-income urban families’ urgent need to escape failing neighborhood schools where they have been trapped by zoning laws for generations (Santos, 2011a & b; Zernike, 2016). This schism in Black leadership has turned potential partners in the longstanding struggle for racial educational equity against one another, and has recently come to a head with the NAACP’s and The Movement for Black Lives' 2016 calls for a moratorium on charters due to concerns about privately appointed
boards, the role of philanthropy, fiscal mismanagement, increased racial segregation, and overly harsh discipline policies.

This schism is also evident at the community-level among Black parents and neighbors in New York City (NYC) such as with New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) public hearings during the Bloomberg administration wherein a mayoral appointed panel decided whether charters would be co-located (or be allowed to share space) in a public school building. During these hearings Black parents were commonly divided between those who fervently opposed the co-location, presuming their children’s traditional public school would be weakened and threatened by the presence of charters, and parents with children enrolled in charters who fervently advocated for the charter to access the space, presuming their children’s academic success was dependent upon the growth and strength of the charter (Cromidas, 2012; Briquelet, 2012). Not surprisingly, this tension is also evident within co-located school buildings, especially when charters have more economic, political, and cultural capital because this leads to recognizable disparities in resources, curriculum and instruction, and facilities that foster “separate and unequal” conditions (Marcius, et al, 2015; Lee, 2014).

**Statement of the Problem**

Charter school proliferation has disproportionately affected Black urban neighborhoods and the debate about the relationship between racial educational equity and enhanced public school choice through charters has created dissension and discord in scholarship and across Black leadership, educational organizing efforts, neighborhoods, and school communities. School choice research concerned with racial educational equity is too often delimited by
advocacy or oppositional perspectives, which have the tendency to frame Black parents engaging in market-based for of choice like charters as disempowered victims or dupes of a neoliberal policy agenda or as liberated and empowered agents of change continuing the radical legacy of the Black Nationalist and Black Power movements. In an effort to address this issue, this study acknowledges the “subaltern agency” of Black parents making tactical and rational choices within an inequitable school choice marketplace while also identifying the racialized costs they incurred and constraints they encountered when engaging in public school choice (Pedroni, 2007).

Moreover, market-based school choice policies position parents as rational decision makers and the success of choice as a public school reform strategy is highly dependent on parents’ preferences and choices, yet parents’ perceptions of and experiences with choice are too rarely the focus of research. Further, research that does focus on parents often does so with a myopic focus on one form of choice, such as charters; this masks many parents’ complicated and nuanced preferences and experiences with a range of different forms of school choice. In other words, using simplistic labels like “charter school parents” without acknowledging preferences for other school types and the potential for multiple choices obscures parents nuanced rationale and the ways in which charters are inextricably related to other schools of choice in a complex and shifting marketplace. This study reveals that Black parents living in Brooklyn have class-divergent school-level preferences and demand a diversified public school choice marketplace that better reflects the diversity of capital in their neighborhoods. Further, this study reveals the potential for Black parents living in
complex and robust school choice markets such as NYC to experience shifting preferences and high rates of school mobility, or moves between multiple schools of choice.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study contributes to school choice literature by centering the school choice perceptions and experiences of Black parents making elementary school choices during a period of ideological and political disunity. In efforts to acknowledge and address this polarization and disunion, this dissertation utilizes Patricia Hill Collin’s (2009) theory of a collective Black American women’s standpoint to argue that Black parents engaging in school choice have more in common than not. This study identifies common racialized challenges Black parents face and their diverse responses to those challenges in order to develop policy recommendations from their collective standpoint. Analyzing the charter school debate and the consequences of school choice policy from the standpoint of Black parents who differ in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and related school preferences and choices but share the racialized challenges of residential segregation and charter school proliferation in their neighborhoods provides necessary nuance obscured by other school choice studies.

Black parents experience choice as “subaltern agency” wherein they understand that they are operating in an unequal playing field, refuse to passively accept what they perceive as the deleterious conditions of their neighborhood and its public schools, and make rational and tactical decisions based on the choices available to them (Pedroni, 2007, p. 35). As this study will demonstrate, just as school choice isn’t limited to charters, issues of racial educational equity are not limited to charters. Osamudia James’s (2013) framework of school choice as “racial subordination” is employed to identify the racialized costs incurred and constraints
encountered by Black parents engaging in a shifting, complex, and inequitable school choice marketplace that includes, but is not limited to, charters (p. 28).

Black parents engaging in school choice during the first two decades of the 21st century do so within a historical context of people of colors’ persistent struggle for access to quality public schools. In large urban school districts like NYC, parents of color engaging in choice must navigate a complex and racialized marketplace consisting of a wide range of school options with different histories, objectives, and consequences. In addition to identifying common challenges, this study contributes to school choice literature in employing Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and embodied and objective cultural capital to interpret Black parents’ generationally and socio-geographically formed standpoints on issues of public school privatization and racial segregation, values assigned to different forms of schools of choice, and the type of educational models they perceive as necessary to advance their own and other Black children’s social and economic mobility. This conceptual framework allows for analysis of the extent to which Black parents internalize, subvert, and reject dominant narratives about public schools, academic achievement, and school choice and of parents’ neighborhood and school-level preferences that reveal both class-divergent and collective demands for racial educational equity.

**Purpose of the Study**

A contest exists over the conflicting, though easily plausible, conceptions of racial educational equity through school choice, and research needs to reveal and clarify the underlying value disputes so that we can better understand the differences and possible paths towards reconciliation (Stone, 2012). The purpose of this study is to identify disparities between the
values and goals of school choice policy and the values, goals, and racialized experiences of Black parents engaging in elementary school choice in Brooklyn, NY. To meet that end, each stage of analysis contrasts Black parents’ counter-narratives, which constitute an experience-based racial politics of school choice, with dominant narratives about school choice and public schools. Further, the analysis identifies common racialized challenges Black urban American parents confront when engaging in elementary choice and their diverse responses to these challenges in order to conceptualize a Black standpoint from which to perceive the effects and promise of school choice policy.

Moreover, because parents’ preferences and decisions are central to market-based reforms, education policymakers, researchers, and organizers have much to learn from parent-centered school choice research. School choice policies shift the power of and responsibility for enrolling children in schools from governments to parents and this study is designed to describe the extent to which parents of color or low-income parents experience engaging in choice as empowering and the effects of carrying that responsibility. Further, by eschewing simplistic categories like “charter school parents” this study reveals sometimes shifting and often frustrated preferences and choices of Black parents competing in a complex elementary school choice marketplace where seats in quality schools are scarce and market-based reforms sometimes do not function as intended.

The topic of school choice is so controversial that school choice research has been critiqued for overemphasizing ideological battles between school choice advocates and opponents, and underemphasizing empirical evidence about the intent and effect of school choice policies (Henig, 2009; Scott, 2005). Instead of developing an argument in support of or in opposition
to school choice or charters, this study is focused on understanding the consequences of over fifteen years of New York State charter school policy on central Brooklyn Black neighborhoods where charters are disproportionately concentrated and developing policy recommendations from Black parents’ standpoint. Even if the growth of the charter sector is stalled as a result of recent calls for charter moratoriums by the NAACP and The Movement for Black Lives, charters constitute a significant market share of large urban school districts and policymakers, educational organizers and researchers, choice advocates and lobbyists, charter leadership, and neighbors and community members will benefit from an analysis of the current school choice marketplace from the standpoint of one of its most important stakeholders.

**Research Questions & Design**

1. How do Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods perceive and experience elementary school choice policy given the context of rapid charter school proliferation in their neighborhoods?

2. How has the introduction of more public school choices in their neighborhoods through charters shaped their elementary school preferences, choices, and experiences and how have parents perceived and experienced the opportunity to make more school choice decisions in an increasingly complex school choice marketplace?

3. How, if at all, do the variables of race, class, and geography influence parents’ school choice preferences, decisions, and behaviors within the context of a complex, rapidly changing, and highly segregated school system?
4. School choice has been framed as a mechanism of liberty and racial educational equity by policymakers and school choice advocates, but how do these intents and assumptions correspond with the perceptions and experiences of Black parents who have engaged in elementary school choice?

The tensions over the relationship between school choice and racial educational equity that were described above constitute what Dvora Yanow (2000) describes as “frame conflict” wherein different interpretive communities focus “cognitively and rationally” on different aspects of policy and value different elements of policy differently (p.11). This study is an interpretive policy analysis of the consequences of charter school policy as perceived by Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where charter schools are disproportionately concentrated. Unlike traditional approaches to policy analysis, interpretive policy analysis explores the contrasts between the intended meaning of policies and the “possibly variant and even incommensurable” interpretations that stakeholders, such as parents, make once the policy has been implemented (Yanow, 2002, p.9). This methodological approach allowed for a comparison of school choice policy values and assumptions with parents’ retrospective perceptions of the changing school choice landscape in their neighborhoods, the preferences they developed and choices they made, and the racialized experiences they had while engaging in elementary school choice.

Data Collection and Analysis

During 2012-2013 in-depth interviews that lasted between one and three hours were conducted with twenty parents in locations of their choice. Interviews were recorded and
transcribed and reflective analytical memos were written after each interview. Full interview transcripts were broken into school choice stories selected using narrative conventions including: internal consistency; logical flow; protagonists and antagonists; plot conflict, tensions, and resolution; and persuasive elements (Yanow, 2000). On-going thematic narrative analysis examined how participants made sense of their personal school choice preferences and experiences and focused on how their narratives drew upon, resisted, and/or transformed dominant narratives related to school choice policy and public schools.

Sample

The twenty parents selected for participation in this study met the sample criteria of identifying as Black or African American, having at least one child enrolled in elementary school at the time of the interview, and residing in one of the six Community School Districts (CDSs) comprising the setting of this study. Recognizing that there is no such thing as a monolithic Black community, this purposeful sample is intentionally diverse in regards to social class, ethnicity, and school choices but similar regarding the experience of being racialized as Black, living in residentially segregated central Brooklyn neighborhoods, and encountering racialized challenges while engaging in school choice. Thematic narrative analysis identified the common racialized challenges these Black parents faced and their diverse reactions to these challenges in order to identify policy problems to be addressed and propose potential solutions from their standpoint.

Setting

Geography is a significant variable in this and other school choice studies; thus, this section is dedicated to an extensive overview of NYC’s educational policy climate at the time of the
study, the historical relationship between school choice and racial educational equity policies in NYC, and the related range of public and private elementary school choices currently available in NYC.

NYC is simultaneously celebrated by some as a national center of school reform innovation and decried by others as one of the most diverse but racially segregated cities in the country. The focus of this study is the school choice perceptions and experiences of Black parents of elementary-aged students living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where charters have recently and rapidly proliferated. While the historically Black and predominately low-income neighborhood of Harlem in northern Manhattan was considered the epicenter of NYC’s charter school experiment in the 2000s, the borough of Brooklyn has been home to the majority of NYC charter schools since 2010, with 85 charters located in Brooklyn as of 2016. One of five boroughs comprising NYC, Brooklyn was chosen as the setting for this study due to the dramatic rate of charter sector growth in this borough over a relatively short period of time. For instance, while the first two Brooklyn charters opened in 2000, by 2010 there were 38, and six years later that number has more than doubled. The majority of Brooklyn charters are concentrated in “deeply isolated Black neighborhoods” in the central Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bedford Stuyvesant, Ocean Hill, Brownsville, and Prospect and Crown Heights; thus, residency in these and similar neighborhoods was used as sample criteria for this study (Fessenden, 2012).

Interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2013, during the end of the third mayoral term of Michael Bloomberg, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist. The Bloomberg
administration has a controversial educational policy legacy that includes: imposing a centralized business-style of management that disempowered local school boards after gaining mayoral control of the school district in 2002; rebranding the central board of education as the Panel for Educational Policy and appointing political allies; promoting high-stakes test-based accountability measures for teachers and schools; closing public schools that failed to demonstrate adequate yearly progress on standardized tests; and supporting the proliferation of charters through lobbying the state policymakers and allowing charters to co-locate in public school buildings (Sullivan, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Bloomberg was also mayor during a period of increasing racial segregation of the public school system, with NYC recently described as “the largest and one of the most segregated public school systems in the nation” (Kuscera, 2014, p. 11).

Compared to other large urban school districts, NYC is unique in that it is also home to powerful financial organizations and lobbyists supporting policymakers who advocate for charter sector expansion with what has been characterized as a “laserlike focus” (Gabriel and Medina, 2010). The location of national foundations and organizations supporting the national charter sector in NYC and their targeted philanthropic support of specific NYC charters makes this a somewhat unique policy landscape. Relatedly, NYC has long been considered a “great center of liberalism” characterized by “cosmopolitan values, progressive politics, and innovation in many fields” (Kuscera, 2014; Usdan, 1968). This unique political climate has engendered not only charter school proliferation, but also a strong teachers’ union and long tradition of progressive schooling that factors heavily in this study but may be atypical in other urban school districts. Further, NYC has a long history of using public
school choice policies to attempt to address educational inequity; thus, NYC parents choose from a relatively robust public school choice marketplace compared to other cities, and they have the task of comprehending and navigating a shifting and complex school choice market for elementary, middle, and high school levels (described later in this section).

NYC may also be a unique setting in that it is also considered a global city. That said, there significant numbers of African and Caribbean immigrants who are racialized as Black but often differ from Black Americans in terms of social class, country of origin, ethnicity, and time living in America and may have different perceptions of and experiences with school choice and racial educational equity as a result (Robotham, 2002; Kasinitz, 1992). In fact, three of the twenty parents participating in this study were first-generation immigrants who had different school choice preferences based on this positionality, yet incurred similar racialized costs and/or faced similar racialized constraints while engaging in school choice.

While NYC is unique in these regards, findings from this study may be translatable to other large urban school districts for several reasons. First, NYC’s implementation of test-based accountability and school choice policies as solutions to academic underachievement and educational inequity under the Bloomberg administration were motivated by national calls for public school reform and served as a model that has been replicated in other cites nationwide. Similarly, the values and principles undergirding school choice policy such as individual freedom of choice and school autonomy have influenced policymakers nationwide and the Bloomberg administration was a national model in charter advocacy and persuading the state to allow for charter sector expansion.
More specifically, the experiences of Black parents engaging in elementary choice in NYC are relevant to those in other urban areas with large Black and low-income populations that are also experiencing rapid charter school proliferation such as New Orleans, Detroit, D.C. or Philadelphia. New York is one of six states where Black students constitute over 60-percent of charter school enrollment and where a sizable gap in enrollment numbers between Black charter and traditional public school students exists (Prothero, 2016). Further, findings may be relevant to cities in Midwestern and Northeastern regions where Black charter student overrepresentation and racial isolation is the highest and where charter schools are intentionally concentrated in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black and Latino urban neighborhoods (Mickelson, et al., 2012; Frankenberg et al., 2010). Along with large charter sectors, these urban areas share a history of people of colors’ protracted struggles for desegregation and racial educational equity, White flight, and the ghettoization of Black neighborhoods.

**Historical Context**

Contemporary school choice policies in urban areas with significant Black and low-income populations are an extension of people of colors’ protracted struggle to ameliorate the negative effects of entrenched racial segregation, escape underperforming schools disproportionately concentrated in their neighborhoods, and access quality schools that will stimulate social and economic mobility for their children. White flight from NYC began with the creation of the Federal Housing Administration in the 1930s and was spurred by the same federal housing policies and local real estate practices that constrained people of color from moving to Whiter and more affluent areas of NYC. As with other urban areas
nationwide, “the subsidization of White outmigration combined with a concerted effort to consolidate Black urban populations within centralized public housing” led to the increasing ghettoization of Black NYC neighborhoods characterized by racial and economic segregation and a lack of “the basic institutional, economic, and political resources that foster healthy and successful development in childhood and economic and social mobility in adulthood” (Sharkey, 2013, p. 59, 13). Charter schools are merely the most recent iteration of NYC educational policies designed to remedy the racialized educational inequities created by the ghettoization of Black urban neighborhoods during the second half of the 20th century.

Black families living in predominately low-income and racially segregated urban neighborhoods have long recognized a crisis of inequitable access to quality public schools and disproportionate concentrations of under-resourced, under-performing, and unsafe public schools in their neighborhoods. The NYC Board of Education developed desegregation plans and commissions immediately after the Brown decision of 1954, yet were largely unable to implement desegregation due to what they referred to as a “formidable array of social forces generally outside of the control of school officials” including patterns of housing segregation and a paucity of funding (Usdan, 1968, p. 6). During the 1950s and 60s Black and Puerto Rican community leaders, parents, and civil rights activists expressed their frustration with NYC’s segregated and unequal school system through historic protests, school boycotts, and occupations of government offices. In 1958 a group of Black activist mothers called the Harlem Nine boycotted their children's schools because they were not receiving an equal education and led a campaign for “Freedom of Choice of Junior High
Schools” that resulted in a court decision recognizing racial discrimination as the cause of “inferior educational opportunities” (Back, 2003, p. 74).

In 1964 frustration with NYC’s failure to integrate schools led civil rights leaders to demand implementation of integration timetables and improvement of inferior school conditions for Black and Latino students. Unmet demands ultimately led to a one-day citywide school boycott wherein over 450,000 students refused to attend school and rallies were staged in front of government buildings, constituting the largest civil rights protest in U.S. history (Khan, 2016). In 1966 Black and Puerto Rican parents and community activists named themselves the People’s Board of Education and occupied NYC’s school district headquarters for two days, protesting the administration’s failure to respond to their concerns about their neighborhood schools and demanding community involvement in implementation of school reforms, employment of community members as teacher assistants, and enhanced accountability through evaluations of school staff (Lewis, 2013).

Additionally, frustrated Black and Puerto Rican activists, parents, and community members living in Harlem in Manhattan and Ocean Hill-Brownsville in Brooklyn shifted the focus from demands for integration to demands for “community control” of their neighborhood public schools. In 1967 the administration approved three unique experimental districts wherein community members, parents, and educators made staffing, curriculum, and school service decisions (Lewis, 2013). This unprecedented experiment in self-determination and governance of neighborhood public schools for low-income urban people of color was short-lived, as the administration ended the community control experiment in response to large-scale, and predominately White, teacher and principal union opposition that culminated in a
historic six-week union strike in the fall of 1968 (Kuscera, 2014; Podair, 2002; Perlstein, 2004).

Attempting to find a political compromise between community control advocates and unions, in 1969 NYS decentralized NYC school governance to 32 Community School Districts with locally elected school boards. In lieu of mandating desegregation or community control, during the 1970s NYS implemented a range of school choice policies designed to promote voluntary integration including educational option programs, magnet schools, and school and district-wide voluntary integration plans (Kuscera, 2014). In addition, NYC began to introduce experimental school choice systems in low-income community school districts during the 1970s and 80s, using bilingual schools, alternative schools, and open zoning for junior high schools to address a variety of parents’ needs and preferences, strengthen school accountability, and stimulate public school reform by introducing market-based pressure (Lewis, 2013). Inspired by these district experiments in school choice as a remedy for educational inequity and a driver market-based reform, the administration even implemented a citywide choice plan in 1993 allowing parents to request a variance in order to transfer to any public elementary or junior high school with available seats (Barbanel, 1993).

Responding to a dominant national narrative of public school crisis promoted by reports such as the Reagan administration’s 1983 Nation At Risk, NYS embraced a national education reform movement comprised of standards, accountability, and choice during the 1980s and 90s. NYS also began recentralizing NYC school governance during the 1990s and ultimately granted mayoral control of the school district to Bloomberg in 2002. Bloomberg used his
centralized power to grant then Chancellor Joel Klein central control over curriculum and instruction, the power to consolidate school governance, and the authority to close and open schools. NYS also passed The Charter School Act in 1998. These education policy shifts heralded an era of school reform at the turn of the century spearheaded by urban school leaders including Chancellor Klein and Washington D.C.’s Michelle Rhee. In “How to Fix Our Schools: A Manifesto” Klein and other urban school district leaders proposed that, secondary to improving teacher quality, the key to improving academic achievement in public schools was providing parents with “a better portfolio of school choices” through closing ineffective public schools and efforts to “make charter schools a truly viable option” (2010).

Shifts in NYC educational policy over the last six decades reflect national educational policy trends of turning away from a focus on racial segregation as a problem and towards a focus on academic achievement as the problem and standards, test-based accountability, and choice as solutions. These different eras of educational policy in NYC have created a complex and fluctuating NYC school choice marketplace comprised of different forms of school choice, each with their unique objectives, demographics, and controversies. The section that follows provides an overview of the different types of elementary school choices available to parents in NYC. In addition to demonstrating how the racial politics of charters are inextricably linked to other schools of choice, this overview also provides a glossary of the eight different forms of public and private school choice that will be referenced throughout the study.

**A Complex and Shifting School Choice Marketplace**

One of the most controversial and commonly researched facets of the NYC school choice system is the high school choice process. NYC requires all students to engage in high school
choice by applying to high school. Beginning in 7th grade, students and families begin the high school choice process by reviewing a 500-page directory of over 400 schools including specialized exam high schools, specialized audition schools, and charters. Then, in the middle of 8th grade students apply to up to 12 public high schools in order of preference.

NYC’s high school choice process has been critiqued as inequitable for low-income students of color and children of immigrants who encounter significant barriers related to where they live and disparate amounts of support provided by adults during the complex and high-stakes process (Perez, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj, 2009 and 2014; Robbins 2011). Further, highly coveted specialized public high schools that use an exam or audition to determine admissions have been widely critiqued for the strikingly and consistently low numbers of Black and Latino admissions (Harris, 2015). NYC’s middle school public school choice process is nearly as complicated, consisting of some CSDs automatically assigning students to their zoned schools and others requiring an application. In addition, parents must also factor a range of middle school choices including district- and citywide selective schools, Gifted & Talented programs, and charters.

While the majority of NYC elementary school students have historically attended their zoned neighborhood school, the range of elementary options became enhanced and increasingly more complex with the rapid proliferation of charters during the Bloomberg administration. The section that follows outlines the different elementary school choice options NYC parents are able to choose from and an overview of related racial politics of each form of school choice.

1) Gifted & Talented
Children entering kindergarten through 3rd grade must pass one of two standardized assessments to be eligible to apply for NYC G&T programs. Children who pass in at least the 97th percentile are admitted into a citywide bracket wherein parents have the choice of any NYC G&T program with available seats while those in the 90th percentile are admitted only to their CSD bracket. As of 2016, according to an InsideSchools.org search there are 84 G&T elementary school programs in NYC, of which 28 are located in Brooklyn. Some of these programs give priority to students who live within the zone and some are unzoned, meaning they take students from an entire district or borough and enroll students by special application or lottery.

Designed as a purportedly colorblind means of supporting the “needs of exceptional students” through “accelerated, rigorous, and specialized instruction” (NYCDOE), NYC’s G&T programs have long been critiqued for the overrepresentation of White, Asian, and higher-income students and the underrepresentation of students from poor districts predominately serving children of color (Roda, 2016; Fleisher and Hollander, 2013; Baker, 2013; Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008; Beveridge, 2008). Critics of the system argue that the standardized testing process and test content privileges more affluent children and that NYCDOE disproportionately locates G&T programs in more affluent districts (Baker, 2013). Similar to issues of inequity that arise with charter co-locations, critics also argue that separating children by test scores within a school building reinforces a “negative stereotype of class and race” and creates “castes within schools, [with] one offered an education that is enriched and accelerated, [and] the other getting a bare-boned version of the material” (ibid; Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008). In an effort to address these longstanding issues, the Bloomberg
administration centralized and standardized admission G&T procedures in 2008. While this policy was intended to promote fairness and transparency, the percentage of eligible students from NYC’s wealthiest districts has increased while the percentage from NYC’s poorest districts has decreased since its implementation (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008; Otterman, 2011; Harris, 2016).

G&T programs were popular form of public school choice in this study, with nine of twenty mentioning G&T programs as an elementary option they considered. However, speaking to issues with admission and program locations, only three of these nine parents enrolled their children in a G&T program, with two pulling children out after their programs proved unsustainable.

2) Magnet Programs

NYC and other urban school districts began using magnet programs in the 1970s to foster voluntary racial integration. Magnets are intended to attract racially- and class-privileged families through the use of thematic curricula and innovative instructional approaches funded by federal and state governments. To meet the objective of integration, magnet programs are often located in racially isolated neighborhoods of color to encourage students of less-privileged racial, ethnic, and class groups to enroll as well. NYC magnets have received federal funding since 1976 and schools continue to apply for magnet grants, with Brooklyn elementary schools winning federal grants in 2010 (Robbins, 2012). However, in alignment with national trends of declining investment in and support for policies designed to promote desegregation, magnets have a relatively small imprint in NYC.
While some studies have demonstrated that magnets have contributed to the goals of desegregation and enhanced academic achievement, as with other forms of choice, there are also concerns that magnet programs foster elitism and inequity through selection processes that privilege higher-achieving students and students with more choice savvy parents (Blank, et.al, 1996). Speaking to the negative effect magnets have had on traditional public schools, research has found that the magnet choices of White and wealthier parents led to increased racial and economic segregation in the neighborhood public schools they left, potentially deteriorating conditions for students remaining in them (Saporito, 2003). Despite valid concerns about magnets engendering elitism and inequity, a recent report on the extreme levels of racial segregation found that magnets constituted “the highest proportion of multiracial schools and the lowest proportion of segregated schools” of all school types in NYC (Kuscera, 2014, p. ix). Despite indicators of success, the recent policy emphasis on charters has led some to perceive NYC magnets as an anachronism, with a local reporter recently describing them as “the Rubik’s Cubes of school reform, relics of the 1980s” (Robbins, 2012).

Speaking to these trends, while parents expressed a strong and frustrated preference for public schools with diverse student bodies, while fourteen parents mentioned at least considering charters only three mentioned considering magnet schools.

3) Unzoned Schools

Unzoned public schools originated in a predominately Black and Puerto Rican Manhattan district where bilingual schools and teacher-directed alternative schools were introduced during the 1970s and 80s in efforts to better meet parents’ needs and improve academic
achievement through enhanced school autonomy and market-based pressures (Lewis, 2013). Today these highly coveted public schools commonly perform better than the citywide average on standardized tests and are often designed around progressive philosophies of curriculum and instruction that offer dual language instruction or G&T programs. As of 2016 there are 84 unzoned (non-charter) public elementary schools in NYC, 31 of which are located in Brooklyn.

While parents listed certain unzoned schools as preferences and choices, they did not specifically refer to them as “unzoned” schools or as an official category of choice and sometimes confused them with charters. Perhaps this is because, unlike most magnets and charters, these schools do not include the distinction of “unzoned” in their school name.

4) Charter Schools

Charters are privately managed public schools that are unzoned and operate under time-limited state-contracts. Charters are granted autonomy from school district governance and are governed by independent groups or management organizations in exchange for using autonomy to advance student achievement. Charters admit students by lotteries held in April. Some have admissions policies that grant preferences for factors such as living the district, having a sibling in the charter, or qualifying for free- or reduced-price lunch. An extension of the legacy of unzoned schools, charters employ diverse educational models, with some implementing a dual-language model and others designed to serve one gender or students with special needs. A common educational model predominately used in Black neighborhoods is referred to as the “no excuses” approach characterized by “back-to-basics”
curriculum, extended school schedules, “zero tolerance” disciplinary practices, and parent contracts (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004).

New York State (NYS) passed the Charter Schools Act in 1998, allowing for 100 charters statewide. The first two opened in the historically Black and predominately low-income NYC neighborhood of Harlem in 1999. As of 2016 NYS has lifted the charter school cap (or limit) twice, with the current cap set to 460 charters statewide, of which 275 (59%) are allotted to NYC. As of this writing, NYC charters serve the second highest number of charter school students in the country after Los Angeles Unified, with a total of 216 charter schools projected to serve 106,600 NYC students (NAPCS, 2014; NYCCSC, 2016). NYC charters predominately serve elementary students, with 158 (73%) using a K-5th, K-8th, or K-12th model. Most charters maintain a wait-list for students not selected in the lottery, and NYC had a cumulative estimate of 44,400 students placed on a wait-list for a charter at the beginning of this school year (NYCCSC, 2016).

Three consecutive Bloomberg terms facilitated the rapid expansion of the charter school sector in NYC with 17 charter schools serving less than 5,000 students when he entered office in 2001 expanding to 183 charter schools serving an estimated 70,000 students by the time he left in 2014. With the assistance of philanthropic and charter advocacy groups, the Bloomberg administration successfully lobbied the state to expand the charter school cap and supported a rapid proliferation of charters in Harlem, leading to the neighborhood’s branding in media as the “mecca of national educational reform movement” and the “epicenter of the city’s push to become a kind of Silicon Valley” of the national charter school movement (Hernandez, 2009; Medina, 2010). Because the NYC charter sector has grown
rapidly it is also a relatively fledgling sector, with the majority of charters operating in their initial 5-year term. Further, not all charters have proven successful, with a total of 15 NYC charters revoked as of 2016.

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, charters are polarizing issue in NYC school politics and low-income communities of color. The Bloomberg administration has been criticized for privileging charters over traditional public schools; working too closely with organizations, foundations, hedge-funds, and other financiers that support charters; using test-based accountability measures to close traditional public schools in order to make way for charters; and mandating that public schools co-locate with charters despite traditional public school community resistance (Sullivan, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Coplon, 2010; Gonzalez, 2009). Moreover, charters have created a significant amount of disruption and public conflict, much of which is rooted in the fact that they were not initially funded for facilities expenses, thus they needed to access free space in public school buildings or face operating at a deficit. The Bloomberg administration used its centralized power to help charters access space, despite opposition from the traditional public schools occupying the buildings. Further, scholars concerned about resegregation argue that charter schools constitute less than 10-percent of NYC’s public schools yet constitute a third of the 100 most segregated public schools in NYC (Fessenden, 2012) and that the majority of NYC charters are racially isolated, with 71-percent of Brooklyn’s charters considered intensely segregated (Kuscera and Orfield, 2014). Local charter advocates counter that the neighborhood public schools are already segregated and that parents deserve the right to escape their “local failure factory” and access a “successful charter school,” regardless of segregation or privatization (Canada, 2010).
same vein, choosing a charter school has been commonly framed by the local and national media, politicians, and charter leaders as empowered “parents voting with their feet” against the failing zoned school in low-income neighborhoods of color (Goldstein, 2010).

Since the 1950s the ultimate aim for low-income parents of color has been equitable access to quality public schools that promote student achievement. Evaluations of NYC’s charter schools reveal that charters are having a positive effect, especially for low-income Black and Latino/Hispanic students. CREDO’s 2013 evaluation of NYC charter school performance found that, on average, charter school students made larger learning gains in reading and math than traditional public school students and that Black and Hispanic students perform better than their counterparts in traditional public schools. However, the report cautions that charter demographics may differ in ways that skew positive results based on “sorting” mechanisms and that charters serve fewer English Language Learners (ELLs) and special education students. While this constitutes some good news for charter advocates and parents seeking alternatives to neighborhood public schools, charters currently serve less than 10-percent of public school students and not all charters have been proven effective in raising achievement. The majority of NYC’s low-income students of color still attend academically underperforming neighborhood elementary schools for a variety of reasons including the fact that there are only a limited amount of high-performing schools for them to choose from in the first place (Spencer, 2012).

Charters proved to be the most popular and accessible form of public school choice in this study, with fourteen of twenty parents considering them as an option and eleven enrolling at least one of their children in a charter at some point during their elementary school years.
5) Variance and Other Means of Accessing Out-of-Zone Public Schools

Parents who want to apply to a zoned school outside of their zone or district also have the option of requesting a Placement Exception Request, or variance, from the district housing their preferred school for reasons including medical or safety issues, location of parents’ employer, or preference to keep siblings together. Variances allow parents to legally enroll their child in a zoned public school outside of their zone.

In addition, it is also common for NYC parents to take unofficial routes such as adding their names to leases, lying about their address, renting in neighborhoods with popular public schools, or using social networks to access a seat for their child in an out-of-zone public school (Ronalds-Hannon, 2011; Higgins, 2013).

As Chapter 4 will document, parents expressed a strong preference for schools located outside of their neighborhood and in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods and they used both official and unofficial means to access them. Seven parents mentioned applying for variance in order to access an out-of-zone public school while five mentioned other unofficial means.

6) Homeschooling Programs

In NYS parents interested in homeschooling their children must submit a letter of intent and an Individualized Home Instruction plan to their school district. During the year they must maintain attendance records, submit quarterly reports, and set their child up for NYS’s approved standardized assessment at the end of the year. NYS school districts may provide students with textbooks and other materials, but are not obligated to do so by law. As of
2012 it is estimated that nearly 3,000 students were homeschooled in NYC, a number that has risen incrementally, with experts citing financial constraints on paying private tuition and public school dissatisfaction as motivating factors in urban areas, rather than religious motivations that are more common state- and nationwide (Powell, 2012). Further, research has also documented increasing trends of African American families homeschooling their children since the 1990s, framing Black homeschooling as an act of “racial protectionism” from Eurocentric curriculum and the racist attitudes and behaviors of White teachers that cause Black children to be disproportionately targeted for special education and punishment (Mazama and Lundy, 2015; 2012, p. 12, 15).

While three parents mentioned homeschooling as an option they considered due to frustrations with the public school system, two described homeschooling as their last resort, and only one actually engaged in homeschooling for a short period of time.

7) Parochial Private Schools

Parochial Catholic private schools are at heart of controversies about equity and school choice in NYC. The Catholic Church unsuccessfully challenged the Protestant cultural monopoly over public schools in the 1830s and this led to the formation of the public school system, the appointment of a Board of Education “dominated by opponents of the Catholic,” and the establishment of a separate Catholic school system in the 1840s (Ravitch, 2000, p. 80). While NYC Catholic schools initially served Irish and other Catholic European immigrants, it became a popular alternative to neighborhood public schools for Black and Latino families as NYC demographics changed during the second half of the 20th century.
In fact, nine of twenty parents in this sample attended parochial school in NYC as children and spoke of their experience fondly, juxtaposing it with their less than favorable public school experiences in high school and as parents. Importantly, these parents had to attend with the reality that this form of school choice was an increasingly limited option for their children. Once considered a “lifeline for minorities,” Black enrollment in parochial schools has dropped from 31 to 17 percent between 2006 and 2013 and NYC parochial schools in predominately low-income neighborhoods of color have been closing in alarming rates since 2011 (Gonzalez, 2013).

Catholic schools have been in decline nationwide since 2000, especially in urban areas, and experts attribute this trend to a range of factors including changing demographics, Catholic Church sex abuse scandals, residential mobility, rising tuition costs, the economic downturn, and charter school sector expansion (Ewert, 2013). Speaking to the inextricable link between charters and other forms of school choice, K-8th enrollment in NYS parochial schools declined by 34-percent between 1990 and 2000, with 200 charters opening for every 200 Catholic schools closed during the last decade (Lackman, 2013). In addition to attracting students away from public schools and creating related funding issues, charters are also seen as attracting students away from parochial schools in “disproportionately large numbers” in Albany and NYC (Council for American Private Education, 2012). Ironically, while charters are intended to foster innovation and market-based reforms in the public school system, their rapid proliferation is seen as having created a crisis for Catholic schools and consequentially reduced the range of parents’ choices (Lestch, 2012).
Speaking to this trend of Catholic school market share decline, eight of twenty parents considered parochial schools as an option, compared to fourteen who considered charters. Further, while one parent had enrolled her child in parochial school for the foreseeable long run, other parents found parochial schools to be unsustainable or appeared to use them as stopgap measures between other public schools of choice.

8) Independent Private Schools

Finally, NYC also has a robust independent private school sector comprised of schools with various educational models including single-gender, dual language, Quaker, Steiner, Montessori, and historically Black independent schools. The NYC independent private school sector is characterized by dramatic racial disparities in enrollment, with Non-Hispanic White children accounting for only 16.9-percent of the public school population compared with 57-percent of private school enrollment, and are concentrated in White and affluent NYC neighborhoods (Beveridge, 2008). Scholarship programs like Early Steps and a Better Chance are intended to increase the enrollment of students of color and promote diversity in NYC independent schools. These programs were mentioned by several parents but not used by any.

Two participants considered and one chose a historically Black independent school for a short period of time. In addition, three parents enrolled their children in different independent Montessori schools - one of which used a needs-based scholarship to afford tuition - and another ran a Montessori-inspired private school out of her home.
Significance

NYC has a differentiated public and private school choice environment. For this reason, the consequences of charter school policy for Black parents must be understood from within this context. While there is a good amount of school choice research about NYC high school choice policy, this study addresses a gap in school choice research by centering parents’ elementary school choice narratives. Relatedly, unlike many school choice studies that use simplistic binary categories like “charter school parent,” this study reveals parents’ complex and sometimes shifting preferences and choices. Avoiding categorization of parents by their choices reveals a sometimes ongoing and iterative school choice process that involves researching, applying for, choosing or being chosen, advocating for children within schools of choice in order to make them sustainable, leaving, and recommencing the process. This study understands charters as inextricably linked to other forms of choice in a complex, rapidly changing, and racialized school choice marketplace and frames choice as a potentially iterative and ongoing process for parents of color that does not end with choosing a school.

Adding to the body of school choice research focused on the role of geography in shaping parents’ choices (Bell, 2009a), this study analyzes parents’ generational relationships with their predominately low-income and racially segregated Black neighborhoods to compare and contrast the cultural values they assign to their neighbors and neighborhood public schools with that of schools and school communities in relatively more affluent and Whiter neighborhoods. Interpreting parents’ preferences using a generational and socio-geographic framework reveals historical and place-based nuance to parents’ positions on racial
desegregation and neighborhood public schools that should be used to inform the charter school debate and school choice research with a focus on racial educational equity.

Relatedly, at the same time that NYC has been heralded as a center of school choice innovation it has also been identified as one of the most racially segregated school districts in the country. Black students are overrepresented in NYC and Brooklyn charter schools and this study contributes to the debate about racial segregation and school choice in an analysis of the racial politics of NYC school choice policy from the perspective of Black parents making elementary school choice decisions. Specifically, this study addresses schisms in academia and across Black leadership, educational organizing and advocacy organizations, neighborhoods, and school communities concerning the relationship between school choice and racial educational equity. These interpretive communities will benefit from the analysis of the charter school debate from a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse Black parent standpoint that identifies mutual racialized challenges that should be addressed across such differences. This study reveals intra-racial class-disparities and –disunion to be addressed as well as areas of shared challenge and concern that can serve as a foundation of community-based organizing for racial educational equity.

Finally, policymakers and charter management organizations, advocates, and lobbyists in NYC and similar large urban school districts will benefit from Black parents’ retrospective standpoint on the consequences of over fifteen years of charter school policy and parents’ narratives about racialized challenges with charters and other forms of public school choice. This study compares and contrasts parents’ school choice narratives with dominant narratives related to school choice in order to highlight the gap between political ideals, their
implementation, and their consequences for parents of color (Pattillo, 2015). Market-based school choice policies are driven by many values assumptions and this analysis provides a unique opportunity to assess the extent to which school choice has enhanced liberty and equity for parents of color and to identify areas in which the market-based reforms are inequitable or not functioning as intended.

This study assumes that the charter sector will remain a significant part of the school choice marketplace in large urban areas, even if its growth is restricted by recent calls for a charter moratorium from national Black civil rights organizations. In fact, multiple calls for a charter moratorium herald an important time for other interpretive policy communities to take pause and learn how to make school choice marketplaces, and each form of school choice comprising them, more equitable from Black parents’ standpoint.

**Limitations**

The researcher is a White graduate student, thus as racial “outsider” researching Black parents’ racialized experiences. Recognizing this limitation, efforts have been made to ensure the study is methodologically sound and ethically grounded with an openness to and expectation of correction, criticism, and challenge at all stages of the research process. While an “insider” researcher may have gleaned different data and “insider” researchers should also conduct similar studies, the researcher’s “outsider” status did provide a unique opportunity for Black parents to “make the familiar strange” and describe perspectives and experiences with a level of detail necessary for someone who is a stranger to the racialized circumstances (Bridges, 2001, p. 374).
As mentioned earlier, another possible limitation is NYC as a setting. This study's findings may be seen as unique to NYC in that it is home to powerful foundations and lobbyists that support charter school policy and charters at the national and local level. Further, NYC is a global city comprised of many immigrant groups including significant numbers of Africans and Caribbeans who impact the racial politics of school choice in NYC for Black parents. Finally, the historical context and wide range of school choice options parents have in NYC was outlined in this chapter to illuminate ways in which NYC may be constitute a uniquely robust and complex school choice marketplace. That said, Bloomberg’s administration served as a national model of public school reform through test-based accountability and market-based school choice reforms. In addition, regardless of class, ethnicity, or country of origin, Black parents who participated in this study incurred racialized costs and encountered racialized constraints when engaging in choice that may resemble the experiences of Black parents living other large urban areas with charters that disproportionately enroll Black students.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the history and ideological underpinnings of American school choice policies and a review related research. School choice policy is framed as having three distinct and sometimes contradictory objectives, each with their own dominant narratives: school choice as the pursuit of parental liberty and empowerment schools’ liberty from bureaucratic governance; school choice as a multifaceted means to promote racial educational equity; and school choice as a lever of academic achievement through innovation and competition created by market-based forces. Returning to debates about school choice
and charters, research supporting and opposing each framing of choice is reviewed in order to document what is already known regarding the racial politics of school choice and to identify gaps. Finally, the conceptual framework is introduced, with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural capital serving as the foundation strengthened by Collin’s (2009) concept of collective Black standpoint, Pedroni’s (2007) concept of “subaltern agency, and James’s (2013) framing of school choice as “racial subordination” for parents of color.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the purpose and process of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000), the foundational methodology chosen for this study, and critical race methodology principles which make the research design suited for an analysis of Black parents’ school choice narratives and the racial politics of school choice (Solorziano and Yosso, 2002, p.32). The process of collecting data using in-depth interviews is described, as is the logic that determined the sample and setting. Finally the process of narrative policy analysis is described and validity threats are identified and addressed.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to an analysis of the socio-geography of parents’ stated preferences for private schooling and for schools located in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. This chapter demonstrates that parents have internalized the dominant narrative of public school crisis and use it to rationalize their discursive preference for private schooling. In addition, their school biographies reveal that this preference is rooted in their habitus, as many attended private schools as children. Despite their discursive preference for private and rejection of public schools, parents were aware that good public schools with strong parent communities existed in Brooklyn, just in other, more affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. Parents’ rejection of public schooling is interpreted as
a dialectical a rejection of their neighbors and neighborhood schools. Parents tended to associate choice with an opportunity to escape the disadvantages of concentrated urban poverty in their neighborhoods and acquire objectified cultural capital connected with culturally valued schools and social networks outside their neighborhood. Importantly, parents expressed strong preferences for schools located outside of their neighborhood and aversion to their neighborhoods despite the introduction of enhanced school choices through charter proliferation in their neighborhoods.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to an analysis of parents’ school-level preferences. Parents across the sample internalized the dominant narrative of the purpose of education being promotion of academic achievement in preparation for college and careers in an increasingly competitive global society. They also perceived their neighborhood public schools as insufficient to meet those ends, articulating critiques of the NYC administration that internalized and subverted dominant narratives about public school crisis. Parents conceptualized choice as the pursuit of dominant cultural capital acquisition through access to distinctive educational programming and student body diversity. Parents expressed class-divergent school-level preferences, with low-income parents expressing a preference for “no excuses” educational models predominately used by charters in Black neighborhoods, while middle-class parents preferred progressive educational models for their children, but believed that this need not be a universal model for all children.

Chapter 6 documents a troubling trend of school mobility, identifies costs incurred by parents when the public school choice market functioned as expected, and documents racialized constraints parents encountered when it did not. School mobility refers to moving
children between schools, in this case during elementary years. A count of all school choices made for each child during elementary years revealed that more than half of the sample moved at least one child once or more during elementary years. This chapter documents the full school choice stories of two low-income single mothers who enrolled their children in a total of five schools then turns to the psychological and professional costs parents incurred related to school mobility and participating in charter lotteries. Finally, the chapter ends with an analysis of racialized constraints parents encountered to identify instances when the public school choice market did not function appropriately for Black parents applying for or enrolling children in charters, G&T programs, and progressive public schools.

Chapter 7 provides a summation of the study’s major findings and draws policy conclusions from them.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

*Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men -- the balance wheel of the social machinery.* - Horace Mann, 1848

When parents engage in school choice they do so within an “increasingly complex social, economic, educational, and political” context with historical roots in twentieth century social justice movements and Supreme Court decisions (Scott, 2005, p. 2). They also enter a longstanding debate about whether education is an effective mechanism for promoting social change by providing social mobility to less privileged groups or whether it functions to reproduce existing social divisions and maintain relative disadvantage (Webb et al., 2002). This review of school choice literature provides a historical overview of various ideological debates about school choice in the U.S. and efforts to make school choice policies levers of social and economic mobility. This review will also outline the related constraints and unintended consequences that have impeded the realization of social change and mobility with each attempt.

According to recent national survey data, the majority of Americans endorse school choice policies that allow parents to choose schools outside of their school district (64%) and charter schools (64%) (Richardson and Bushaw, 2015). Despite widespread support, school choice has been and continues to be a highly contentious reform strategy. Many
disagreements about school choice policy in the United States are representative of longstanding tensions between values of equality and liberty, democracy and capitalism, individual liberty and collective needs, and choice and diversity (Saiger, 2014; Labaree, 2010; Scott, 2005). Driven by the belief that “the essence of policymaking is the struggle over ideas” and that the task of policy analysis is to “reveal and clarify contests over conflicting, though equally plausible conceptions of the same abstract goal or value,” this chapter aims to review the ideological debate about school choice policy and empirical evidence relevant to each position (Stone, 2012, p. 13).

This literature review is organized in three sections, identifying the shifting and often contradictory purposes of school choice policies from that of promoting liberty, to promoting racial educational equity, to its most recent iteration as a lever of academic excellence. Racial politics have been central to school choice policies and debates since the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision and often involve shifting theories of racial educational equity and philosophies of the purpose of schooling (Stulberg, 2008). Therefore, while this review is broad and national in scope, every section will focus on how these ideological debates and empirical findings relate to Black families living in urban neighborhoods. This study focuses specifically on the experiences of urban Black families for reasons relevant to school choice literature. First, a disproportionate percentage of Black students attend public schools of choice compared to other school types other racial groups, and more than half of public schools of choice are located in urban areas where people of color are concentrated (Grady, et al., 2010). Secondly, African Americans have a historical activist legacy of creating independent schools and demanding desegregation, community control over their
neighborhood schools, public school accountability, and expanded choice that will be outlined in this review.

This review is followed by an overview of the conceptual framework guiding this study comprised of Pierre Bourdieu's' theory of social and cultural reproduction of class stratification through schools, Thomas Pedroni's concept of “subaltern agency,” Osamudia James's theory of school choice as “racial subordination,” and Patricia Hill Collin's theory of a collective Black standpoint.

Choice as the Pursuit of Liberty, Empowerment, and Agency

School choice researchers often delineate between school choice as a concept and as a policy. Some trace the policy origins of school choice to the 1925 Supreme Court Pierce vs. Society of Sisters decision which struck down Oregon's compulsory public school attendance law, determining that children are not “mere creatures of the State” and framing parents’ right to choose which school their children attend as a “liberty” protected by the 14th amendment (Saiger, 2014; Minow, 2010; James, 2013). This court decision not only protected the liberty of children and parents from government control, it also legitimized and protected schools of choice, in this case Catholic parochial schools, as legal alternatives to compulsory public school attendance.

The origin of school choice as a concept is often traced back to Milton Friedman’s (1955) argument that American society’s “ultimate objective” is individual freedom, thus public school governance should shift away from administration to that of requiring a minimum level of education and financing vouchers that parents can freely exchange in a deregulated school marketplace (p. 1). While vouchers have ultimately proven to be politically and
publicly unpopular, Friedman’s call for parental freedom to choose schools in a deregulated educational marketplace undergirds the rationale for other public school choice policies, including politically and publicly popular charter school policy.

School choice advocates in this ideological vein believe that parents should be positioned as liberated and empowered consumers in a competitive marketplace. Further, they frame “direct democratic control and bureaucracy” of schools as the problem and propose school autonomy and competition between schools as the solution (Chubb and Moe, 1990, p. 186). Thus, they believe that the role of local and state governments in education should be limited to protecting individual freedom to choose and providing sufficient choices in the educational marketplace to foster competition and academic improvement. This constitutes a direct challenge to Horace Mann’s 19th century argument that parents choosing from a range of self-governed schools undermined shared civic values, a belief that serves as the underlying logic behind today’s locally controlled school districts. The ideology undergirding market-based school choice policy rejects Mann’s framing of common schools as the great equalizer, suggesting instead that granting consumers with the freedom and power to choose from a range of autonomous schools in a competitive school market is the route to social equality.

School choice is one of many social reform strategies under the umbrella of a broad neoliberal policy agenda which replaces a democratic public “composed of often disinterested voters whose wishes are manifest through elected representatives and entrenched bureaucracy” with an alternate public comprised of individual consumers granted the liberty to “vote with their feet” when unsatisfied (Feinberg and Lubeinski, 2008,
Marxist scholar David Harvey (2007) locates the origins of neoliberalism in the social movements of the late 1960s, defining it as a belief that:

human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade [wherein t]he role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (p. 2).

Neoliberalism privileges individual freedom and human dignity over other political values and believes in governmental deregulation and privatization. It greatly influenced the policy agendas of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s and has maintained a political and economic stronghold in Western democratic societies ever since.

While it is difficult to take issue with freedom and human dignity as principles, Harvey (2007) cautions that neoliberalism has been used a “system of justification and legitimization for whatever needed to be done to achieve the restoration or creation of the power of an economic elite” that was threatened by worldwide protests beginning in the 1960s (p. 19). Harvey also critiques neoliberalism for its inherent tensions and contradictions including asymmetries of power or capital and the tension between the lure of “seductive but alienating individualism” and the basic human desire for a “meaningful collective life” (2007, p. 69).
School choice scholars concerned with such asymmetries of power claim that families with more economic, social, and/or cultural capital have an unfair advantage in the educational marketplace, leading to a potential concentration of low-income students in underperforming traditional public schools (Bell, 2008, 2007; Villavicencio, 2012; Holme, 2002; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008; Andre-Bechely, 2005; Teske, 2012). In other words, they assert that the liberty to choose and govern schools represents what Harvey (2007) refers to as “bad” freedom because it is “only realized for some but at the expense of the exploitation of others” (p. 37).

Market-based school choice policies like charters, vouchers, and homeschooling are premised on the values of freedom, liberty and human dignity, yet have also led to social disparities. Harvey explains that neoliberal theory is used to justify and veil the political practice of neoliberalization, or the process of “accumulation by dispossession” characterized by the transfer of assets from public to private class-privileged domains; speculative and predatory financialization; the management and manipulation of crisis; and the redistribution of state capital from the working and middle-class to the upper classes (2007, p. 160). That is, while neoliberal social reforms like charter schools are purported to enhance individual freedom and liberty, Harvey argues that they actually achieve the “restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites” (p. 33). This is related to the process of what Naomi Klein (2008) defines “disaster capitalism,” or the economic elite’s “treatment of disasters [or crises] as exciting market opportunities” (p. 6).

Many school choice scholars have applied the concepts of “accumulation by dispossession” and “disaster capitalism” to critique the relationship between high-stakes accountability
policies and public school choice policies. Scholars employing neoliberalization as a framework argue that contemporary school choice policy has shifted the monopoly of power from educational bureaucracies to predominately White venture philanthropists who use unprecedented concentrations of economic capital to become “central and active drivers of policy making, research, and advocacy” (Scott, 2009, p.108; Fabricant and Fine, 2012; Ravitch, 2010; Lipman, 2013). In other words, while school choice policies purport to liberate and empower parents, these researchers argue that charters and vouchers are part of a neoliberal agenda to shift public power over schools to private hands. Further troubling the concept of parental liberty and empowerment through choice, school choice policies are also critiqued for their role in shifting responsibility for student or school success or failure from the state to individuals and for undermining the aforementioned political values of community and collaboration seen as vital to previous struggles for equality (James, 2013).

Speaking to the racial politics of this debate, scholars also question the extent to which parental liberty to choose is equitable across race and class. Osamudia James (2013) critiques the notion of colorblind choices in a society where access and opportunity are stratified by race and class, highlighting the “racialized constraints” under which people of color exercise school choice including the scarcity of proximal and reasonable alternatives in their neighborhoods, the impact of “cultural deficit theories that demean and devalue minority parental participation in their children’s schooling,” and the “trauma of racialized schooling experiences” (p.5).

On the other hand, school choice advocates have long held that public school failure in urban neighborhoods of color is the inevitable result of governments holding low-income, racially
isolated families captive in failing neighborhood public schools because they cannot afford residential relocation or private school tuition (Jencks, 1972). From this standpoint, empowerment is rooted in freeing and empowering parents of color to exit neighborhood public schools and choose better alternatives. Considering that racial segregation and the racial achievement gap have persisted despite decades of school reforms and longstanding struggles for desegregation, it is easy to see how the concept of individual liberty to choose schools might be appealing to parents of color who feel trapped in their neighborhood schools. Further, the fact that market-based reform conceptually repositions parents as “rational consumers” with agency in a competitive marketplace when public schools have a historical tendency to exclude and disregard low-income, uneducated, and/or parents of color only adds to the appeal of liberty through school choice (Noguera, 2003).

The dominant narrative of liberation through school choice for historically oppressed groups has engendered what has been characterized as “strange bedfellows” or “odd coalitions” comprised of low-income communities of color and the progressive or liberal politicians elected by them increasingly embracing market-based school reforms and aligning themselves with dominant political forces (Pedroni, 2004, p. 1; Feinberg and Lubeinski, p. 1). Rooted in the belief that “individuals often want things for the community that conflict with what they want for themselves” this study analyzes how Black parents internalize, subvert, and/or reject the dominant framing of choice as liberation, empowerment, and agency with specific attention to how parents’ interpret the relationship between their preferences and inter- and intra-racial asymmetries of power (ibid, p.24).
Relatedly, Mary Pattillo (2015) makes an important distinction between weak and strong forms of empowerment, explaining that weak empowerment privileges parents’ preferences and choices while strong empowerment grants parents’ access to responsive political actors and institutions and a determinative say in decision-making. Thomas Pedroni (2004) makes a similar distinction between the concept of agency when individuals take control of themselves for some desired purpose and “subaltern agency” in which marginalized people maintain a “tactical relationship to power, sensing the need to act within the spaces that the powerful provide, sometimes in ways that creatively turn the strategic deployments of the powerful back against the powerful, and other times in ways that are ultimately self-defeating” (p. 37-38). This study recognizes the elementary school choices of Black parents as forms of weak empowerment and subaltern agency and engages these concepts in the analyses that follow.

**Choice as the Pursuit of Racial Educational Equity**

The social construct of race and the practice of racism have a long and complicated relationship with school choice policies. Scholars concerned with racial educational equity trace the origins of school choice policy to reactions to the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* decision and desegregation strategies that followed. The *Brown I* and *II* decisions are pivotal to school choice debates because they made schools a key player in the social and political struggle for racial educational equity by decreeing that racially “separate educational institutions are inherently unequal” and that racially separate school systems must be dismantled with “all deliberate speed.” The literature reviewed below provides an overview of how school choice policy was used in efforts to resist
desegregation, implement voluntary desegregation, and ultimately provide educational options to families of color who were trapped in racially isolated urban public schools with concentrated poverty after desegregation strategies began to be dismantled.

Much of the scholarly debate about the relationship between the pursuit of racial educational equity and school choice questions whether school choice perpetuates and exacerbates racial segregation and inequality or whether school choice is means of liberation and equity for historically marginalized racial groups in the face of persistent resistance to racial desegregation. Where one falls in this debate is often related to one’s interpretation of the purpose and legacy of Brown. Desegregation scholars who believe in the “spirit” of Brown’s decree that “student diversity is a valuable public-policy goal” also believe that racial equality will only be achieved through education policies that promote racial desegregation (Scott, 2005, p. 6; Wells, 2005; Orfield and Lee, 2007). On the other hand, critical race theorists have called for a critical re-interpretation of Brown “in light of its ineffectuality” to provide improved educational opportunities for people of color and similarly-minded school choice advocates believe racial equality will only be achieved through equality of access to quality schools, regardless of integration (Ladson Billings and Tate IV, 1995; Bell, 2004; Barnes, 1997; Stulberg, 2004). In addition to this scholarly debate, the American public tends to perceive educational policies that intentionally segregate students and educational policies that limit parents’ liberty to choose schools with equal disdain, leaving policymakers concerned about promoting equity and maintaining public support with a difficult task (Scott, 2005).
This section of the literature review provides an overview of the social and political tensions and conflicts between the values of parental liberty and racial educational equity that have characterized the school choice policy debate since the 1950s, outlining how school choice policy objectives have shifted over time in response to changing racial politics. Further, it summarizes related empirical findings on contemporary parental school choice preferences and the extent to which race factors into parents’ stated preferences and actual choices.

*Choice as a Strategy to Protect White Liberty From Desegregation Mandates*

Scholars concerned with racial educational equity trace the origins of school choice policy to Southern policies implemented after *Brown* to defy and forestall desegregation plans, using choice as a “segregationist instrument” by providing “multiple escape routes” for White students through the state-subsidization of private school teacher salaries or tuition and “freedom of choice” laws (Scott, 2011, p.37; Stulberg, 2004; Minow, 2011; Levin, 1999). These school choice policies served as a symbol of Southern states’ and White families’ resistance to federal government intervention that were not struck down by courts until the late 1960s and early 70s (Stulberg, 2004). Importantly, this is an instance where White parents used choice as a pursuit of liberty from policies designed to promote racial educational equity.

In the North White families sometimes resisted implementation of desegregation policies forcefully, as with the mass protests and violent resistance of White Boston residents in the mid-1970s, but more often obliquely, through taking advantage of racist housing policies and practices and engaging in suburban residential school choice. Importantly, bussing for the purpose of racial desegregation became a heated issue precisely because it deprived Whites
and many Black parents of their liberty to choose their children’s schools (Bell, 2004). In part aiming to protect their liberty to choose schools, Whites moved out of Northern urban centers en masse between the 1950s and 1980s for the suburbs in a phenomenon commonly referred to as “White flight” (Noguera, 2003; Barnes, 1997; Massey and Denton, 1993). This mass White exodus to the suburbs was fostered by housing, tax and lending, transportation, and school policies and resulted in decimated urban tax-bases, dramatic urban demographic shifts, an the state-sanctioned construction of ghettoized Black urban neighborhoods characterized by extreme levels of racial segregation and social and economic isolation (Erickson, 2011; Massey and Denton, 1993).

In response to White flight to the suburbs, desegregation advocates proposed including suburban districts in desegregation plans. In 1970 Detroit parents and Detroit’s branch of the NAACP sued the Michigan Board of Education to implement an inter-district desegregation plan for Detroit and suburban schools because state-sanctioned White flight to the suburbs had rendered urban desegregation plans impossible (Hertz, 2014). *Milliken v. Bradley* went to the Supreme Court in 1974 where it was determined there was no proof of racial discrimination in the suburban schools and the proposed inter-district desegregation plan was found unconstitutional (Freeswick, 1975). This decision derailed national metropolitan desegregation plans as courts became unwilling to identify housing discrimination as the cause of school segregation or hold school boards and other government agencies accountable for addressing housing discrimination (Bell, 2004). It also protected racially and economically privileged parents’ use of state-sanctioned private residential choice in the suburbs, allowing them to avoid mandated urban desegregation
plans and discount their reliance on government subsidies by “imagining their own success as the product of autonomous hard work” (Erickson, 2011, p. 125).

Choice as a Strategy to Promote Voluntary Racial Desegregation

In response to these trends, policymakers attempted to use public school choice policies as mechanisms of voluntary desegregation during the 1970s and 1980s to balance conflicting demands for parental liberty to choose schools and racial educational equity (Minnow, 2011; Henig, et al., 1999; Wells and Crain, 2005). Hoping to curb the deleterious effects of White flight on urban neighborhoods and schools and attempting to implement court-mandated desegregation plans, metropolitan areas adopted several forms of school choice plans with racial quotas including: inter-district voluntary transfer programs where students were allowed to cross city-suburban district lines; controlled choice; and urban magnet schools characterized by additional funding for enriched, specialized, and sometimes competitive programs. The objective of school choice plans with racial quotas was the promotion of voluntary racial desegregation though the expansion of urban schooling options designed to attract White parents and provide opportunities for urban students of color to escape failing neighborhood schools (Minnow, 2011; Stulberg, 2004; Scott, 2011; Barnes, 1997).

There is evidence that voluntary inter-district programs benefitted students, particularly African Americans; however, there is also evidence that these programs came with unanticipated social costs similar to contemporary concerns about charters. For one, when urban parents of color transferred out of their neighborhood public schools, they negatively impacted the schools and the children who stayed in the schools (Wells and Crain, 2005). Further, voluntary inter-district plans have been critiqued for primarily benefitting White
suburban families with the time and resources necessary to travel into the city for school each day, whereas daily travel to the suburbs proved to be an “untenable choice” for many low-income families of color with less capital (Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011, p 795). Relatedly, although it is their objective, magnet schools have a mixed record when it comes to achieving desegregation and have been shown to exacerbate racial segregation by providing choices to urban White families with documented “out-group avoidance patterns” regardless of schools’ rates of poverty, test scores, and safety (Saporito, 2003, p. 198). Magnets have also been shown to exacerbate class segregation with their tendency to enroll children from dual-parent households where parents are better educated and more affluent than families assigned to neighborhood public schools or ability tracking (Levin, 1999; Andre-Bechely, 2005).

Furthermore, desegregation plans of the 1950s and 60s and bussing during the 1970s and 80s are seen as having led to the closure of Black schools that “severed Black neighborhoods from educational institutions” and to have disproportionately burdened Black students and families who left their neighborhoods earlier, traveled further, and attended suburban schools where desegregation took place on “White students’ cultural and social ‘turf’” (Erickson, 2011, p. 126; Wells and Crain, 2005, p. 70). The closure of Black schools also had adverse professional and economic consequences for Black teachers and administrators who were dismissed and demoted as a result of desegregation efforts (Bell, 2004). Citing the experiences of Black students who were “shuffled in and out of predominately White schools” where they were often placed in inferior academic tracks and experienced “naked race-hated and a curriculum blind to their needs” and of Black parents who “had no input
into the school policies and little opportunity to involve themselves in school life,” Derrick Bell (2004) argues that Black parents’ disillusionment is an underappreciated facet of dramatically declining support for desegregation during the 1980s (p. 112).

While Justice Clarence Thomas that the basic premise of desegregation was problematic because it patronizingly assumed that students of color will never experience academic success without exposure to White children (cited in Barnes, 1997), desegregation advocates argue that White resistance and political forces stifled and eventually dismantled progress (Wells, et al., 2005). Despite these different ways of perceiving the legacy of Brown, there is a general consensus that desegregation polices had an integrative effect until the 1980s followed by a consistent decline due to court decisions and policymakers’ preference for more deregulated forms of school choice.

*Urban Parents of Color Demand Liberty and Control*

Many school choice advocates and people of color disagree that the struggle for racial educational equity hinges on desegregation. In response to the social and political context of what is referred to as the post-Brown and post-civil rights era, the concept of racial educational equity has proven to be fluid and complex. Education reforms of the 1960s and 70s were strongly influenced by widespread White resistance to mandated desegregation, people of colors’ frustration with White resistance and the slow pace of desegregation, and the rise of the Black Power and Black Nationalism movements (Barnes, 1997; Levin, 1999; Stulberg, 2004, 2008). During this period, some civil rights leaders began arguing that the goal of Brown was that of equal educational opportunity, not integration. As a result, many people of color who felt trapped in persistently failing urban schools shifted their demands
from desegregation to the right to educational self-determination (Bell, 2004; Stulberg, 2004, 2008).

In the late 1960s Black and Puerto Rican parents, activists, and community members living in the low-income NYC neighborhoods of Harlem and Ocean Hill-Brownsville fought for and won the short-lived right to an experiment in “community control” of their schools. Community control symbolized a dramatic shift away from Mann’s 19th century concept of common public schools for heterogeneous student bodies towards a more radical concept of parents and communities’ right to educational self-determination and –governance of racially and culturally homogenous neighborhood schools. Instead of demanding the individual right to choose a school outside of their low-income and racially isolated neighborhoods, the community control movement demanded the collective right to select and govern their neighborhood public school’s “personnel and school leadership, budget, curriculum, and programming” (Stulberg, 2008, p. 32). While this experiment was short-lived and politically controversial, the model is credited with troubling the concept of racial educational equity and providing a rationale for public school choice plans that followed in its wake including NYC’s alternative and bilingual choice schools, community-controlled independent schools, vouchers, and charter schools (Lewis, 2013; Stulberg, 2004, 2008).

Although many scholars continue to frame segregation as racial inequity, the post-Brown and post-Civil Rights framing of racial educational equity as the right to educational self-determination continues to shape school choice policies to this day. In this sense, some school choice advocates posit that racial educational equity will be achieved by granting historically oppressed racial groups liberty and educational self-determination through the
right to choose or create better learning environments for their children, regardless of whether they are racially segregated environments. Charters, vouchers, and homeschooling have gained increasing public and political support within this social and historical context because they grant low-income parents and parents of color the liberty to take control of their children's educational destinies while decentering the historically fraught goal of racial desegregation.

Like voluntary desegregation plans, the current era of market-based school choice policies intend to promote both parental liberty and racial educational equity. While distinct from each other in design and implementation, contemporary market-based school choice policies share the objective of promoting liberty by deregulating educational markets and racial educational equity by empowering parents of color to escape their neighborhood-zoned schools. School choice advocates argue that the expansion of charters, vouchers, and homeschooling options has the potential to promote racial educational equity in this historical context by providing escape routes to parents who otherwise cannot afford to move to a better district or to pay private school tuition.

Focusing on these shifts in school choice policy and the concept racial educational equity, Thomas Pedroni (2007) argues that African Americans’ support and embrace of vouchers in Milwaukee is representative of a “new Black agenda” that is a product of “legitimate grievances” and is representative of “parents’ agency on a social and educational terrain over which they have had little control” and is not of their choosing (p. 4). According to Pedroni, school marketization created by vouchers creates opportunities for Black families to “finally ‘work the system’” and forces school professionals to stop perceiving Black parents as
culturally or racially deficient and begin embracing them as “rational consumers” who they must make efforts to recruit and retain (p. 6). In this context, Pedroni frames African Americans’ embrace of school choice as an act of “subaltern agency” in which marginalized people maintain a “tactical relationship to power, sensing the need to act within the spaces that the powerful provide, sometimes in ways that creatively turn the strategic deployments of the powerful back against the powerful, and other times in ways that are ultimately self-defeating” (p. 37-38).

Similarly, Lisa Stulberg (2008) frames charter and voucher policy as promoting “African American educational self-determination” and a crucial means for African Americans to “remain hopeful about the possibility of schooling to impact social change and expand opportunity” in light of a persistent racial achievement gap and the dismantling of civil rights-era policies designed to address racial inequality (p. 163, 157). She argues that charters are a response to frustration with the protracted struggle for desegregation and an extension of African American radical school reform efforts of the late 1960s that include the community control movement in NYC, ethnocentric independent schools run by social and political dissidents, publicly and privately funded community controlled independent schools, and the Council of Independent Black Institutions (2004).

Stulberg (2008) also argues that each stage of African American school choice advocacy has been motivated by the belief that schools are either “capable of bringing either cultural strength or cultural devastation to African American individuals and communities” and that “building African American identity, community, and legacy should be a central purpose of African American schooling” (2008, p. 162). Ama Mazama and Garvey Lundy (2015; 2012)
share a similar perspective, noting increasing trends of African American families homeschooling their children since the 1990s, and framing Black homeschooling as an act of “racial protectionism” from Eurocentric curriculum, racist attitudes and behaviors of White teachers, the trend of Black children disproportionately targeted for special education and punishment (2015; 2012, p. 12). Mazama and Lundy argue that homeschooling policies allow for an “operationalization of African agency” defined as Black parents’ “ability to act in their own interest” and the “creation of a liberated and protected space” that is obtained by teaching children about Africa and African Americans in order to impart self-knowledge and self-esteem (p. 16, 18).

Relatedly, school choice advocates in this ideological vein also argue that choice promotes equity through granting schools programmatic autonomy and parents the liberty to choose from a range of culturally pluralistic educational programs designed to serve distinct religious, ethnic, language, and disability groups (Minow, 2011, p. 835). For instance, NYS charter school law allows for specialized curricular programs including dual language or single-gender charters. While different in design and implementation, vouchers, charters, and homeschooling policies provide the opportunity for schools to develop and parents to select educational programs that value cultural pluralism or heterogeneity over cultural assimilation or homogeneity. In other words, these market-based reforms allow for the opportunity to reject the use of public schooling as a mechanism of assimilation to dominant culture and promote the potential for public schools to promote a celebration and preservation of distinct non-dominant cultures.
Dismissing concerns about school choice policies exacerbating racial segregation, school choice advocates frame parents of colors’ choices of ethnocentric educational programs as self-determined acts of “self-segregation” wherein parents prefer educational programs that “celebrate their own cultural heritage,” rejecting cultural assimilation and heterogeneity (Minow, 2011, p. 835; Buchanan and Fox, 2004; Belgrade, 2004; Yancey, 2004). While this may apply to other school districts, despite a substantial immigrant population and related ethnic diversity, NYC has a very limited selection of what could be considered ethnocentric educational programs. These include the Hebrew Language Academy Charter, the Hellenic Classical Charter, and the Khalil Gibran International Academy. Notably, two of the three ethnocentric public schools of choice schools listed above are designed to celebrate Jewish and Greek cultural heritage, both ethnic groups subsumed under and privileged by Whiteness, while the Arabic dual language school that predominately serves students of color has been the site of significant political contention.

The concepts of “educational self-determinism” and “subaltern agency” are promising conceptual lenses through which to understand Black parents’ school choice narratives because they avoid framing parents of color as dupes or victims without agency; however, each concept is limited by the designs of the studies from which they emerged. For instance, the realization of Milwaukee’s voucher program that Pedroni (2007) developed his concept of “subaltern agency” from was highly dependent upon the leadership of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO). While NYC has some Black-led organizations that support school choice such as the relatively new Families for Excellent Schools, it is important to test
the application of these theories in different social and political contexts as such organizations do not have the same level of social and political capital as BAEO.

Further, just as Stulberg (2004) correctly asserts that school choice opponents are sometimes blind to the influence of radical Black activism on the charter school movement, the simplistic use of racial categories is equally blind to varied beliefs and values across Black leaders, parents, and community members’ then and now. For instance, just as some Black leaders and parents believed that racial educational equity was best achieved through solidarity with labor or through racial integration during NYC’s community control experiment, the NYC and national chapters of the NAACP and The Movement for Black Lives have taken stands against charters, arguing that they exacerbate educational inequities for students of color.

Finally, Stulberg (2008) built her concept of “educational self-determination” largely from historical analysis with limited fieldwork in one charter school that was founded and governed by predominately African American school leaders. Recognizing this limitation, it is important to acknowledge trends of White governance of charter schools and systems disproportionately serving Black students. Janelle Scott (2008) argues that charter school policy has created inroads to economic and political capital accumulation for “mostly White men” who control the school choice market while positioning themselves as the new leaders of Black and Latino education (p.173). Similarly, a recent study described the charter school authorization process in New Orleans as an “overwhelmingly White-dominated enterprise that tacitly restricted Black educators” (Henry and Dixson, 2016, p. 230). These observations integrate the variables of race and racism into Harvey’s concept and critique of
neoliberalization and are examples of what Derrick Bell (2004) refers to as “interest convergence,” wherein Black efforts to achieve racial educational equity are only embraced when they converge with the interests of White policymakers and economic elites (p. 49).

Scott (2011) critiques “new school managers” and charter advocates for circulating a dominant narrative of school choice as a civil right and employ civil rights movement rhetoric such as “equal education opportunity” that serve to establish a common sense that the charter school movement is a just and moral alternative to the traditional school system for poor parents of color (p. 32). She argues that the rhetorical framing of school choice as a civil right more often than not privileges charters and vouchers over other existing forms of choice designed to promote race and class desegregation such as magnet schools and voluntary transfer plans, thus privileging choice plans that potentially keep low-income and Black students within or near their home districts (ibid).

Despite its limitations, scholarship framing contemporary school choice policies as mechanisms of racial educational equity through the promotion of “subaltern agency,” “self-determinism,” “cultural pluralism,” and “racial protectionism” serves as an important reminder that the concept of racial educational equity is complex and that socio-historical and political context must be taken into account. It also highlights the potential for public school choice to simultaneously activate subaltern agency and exacerbate racial segregation and inequity.

Choice as a Driver of Resegregation

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court Brown decision was informed by research findings that racial segregation has a detrimental psychological effect on children of color because it “generates a
feeling of inferiority...that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” Contemporary research argues that racially and economically segregated schools are still unequal and detrimental to students of color because they are “strongly related to an array of factors that limit educational opportunities and outcomes” including inequalities in per-pupil spending, less experienced and less qualified teachers, high levels of teacher turnover, harsher discipline, less successful peer groups, inadequate facilitates and learning materials, and less access to advanced placement classes (Orfield, et.al, 2012, p. 8; Adamson and Darling-Hammond, 2012; U.S. DOE, OCR, 2014). Further, historical analysis suggests that racial segregation has the potential to “create political vulnerability” for institutions disproportionately serving low-income or students of color because “political support wanes once they are identified as program ‘for’ poor people or poor people of color” (Erickson, 2011, p. 128).

Over the last two decades school desegregation scholars have noted disturbing trends of school resegregation that they attribute to several factors. First, public school demographics have shifted since the 1960s, with the number of White public school students declining, Latinos increasing, and trends of middle-class Blacks moving to the suburbs, “leaving inner city Blacks more isolated than ever” (Orfield and Lee, 2007, p. 14). Secondly, since the 1970s, the Supreme Court has granted unitary status to many districts, dismantling mandatory desegregation plans. These court decisions constitute a judicial trend of resistance to race-conscious affirmative action plans exemplified by the 2007 Parents Involved in Community Schools decision that restricted public school systems from using race as a factor in voluntary desegregation plans (ibid; McDermott, et al. 2012). Finally, market-based school choice
policies have been identified as a cause of resegregation because most schools of choice are equally or more segregated by race, ethnicity, and class than neighborhood public schools (Mickelson, et al., 2012; Levin, 1999).

While information about the demographics of private schools that accept vouchers is limited, research has shown that, by design, vouchers are predominately used by low-income Black and Latino families who live in racially segregated urban neighborhoods and tend to choose segregated private and religious schools (Mickelson et al, 2012). Analysis of the private school sector also finds that parochial schools are often more racially segregated than public schools, especially in large urban areas like NYC with large Black populations and high levels of residential segregation, and that Black students experience more segregation in the private than public sector, especially in Catholic and other religious schools (Yun and Reardon, 2005).

There is also evidence that charter schools increase racial and economic isolation for students of color, with Black students overrepresented in charters and far more likely to experience racial isolation in charters than their peers in traditional public schools (Mickelson, et al., 2012; Frankenberg et al., 2010). Black charter student overrepresentation and racial isolation is the highest in the Midwest and Northeast where charter schools are intentionally concentrated in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black and Latino urban neighborhoods (Mickelson, et al., 2012; Frankenberg et al., 2010). While segregation scholars critique the quality of charter school data for the lack of conclusive findings on segregation by factors other than race, there is additional evidence that charters are also more segregated by achievement and ability than traditional public schools, with
special education and English Language Learner students underrepresented in charter schools (Mickelson et al., 2012; Weber, 2009; Welner and Howe, 2005; UFT, 2010).

To what extent should racial resegregation - and the role of school choice in exacerbating it - be considered an issue of racial educational equity in the post-Brown and post-civil rights era? School choice advocate Lisa Stulberg (2008) argues that charters provide frustrated African Americans with a solution that has simultaneously “emphasized the irrelevance of desegregation as an immediate goal” and made desegregation politically relevant again by gaining the attention of desegregation scholars and providing a new forum in which the desegregation debate continues (p. 163). Advocates also argue that the majority of charters are segregated precisely because often their mission is to serve low-income and racially isolated populations residing in segregated neighborhoods that lack the resources and capital to afford private tuition or engage in residential choice (Kern et al., 2012; Stulberg, 2008, 2004). Further, they argue that schools of choice promote a new vision of “equity as differentiation” in targeting specific genders, ethnicities, abilities, or academic interests, thus better meeting historically oppressed students’ needs and interests (Ascher and Wamba, 2005). In this case, parents are understood to be choosing differentiated and targeted educational programming in schools with demographics similar to their own, regardless of whether the school they choose is segregated and/or has lower test scores than the school they left (Mickelson, et al., 2012; Weiher and Tedin, 2002; Levin, 1999).

Those who are critical of this framing of racial educational equity highlight “crude programmatic and curricula differentiation” between charters serving White middle-class students and low-income students of color, with low-income students of color in racially
segregated charters less likely to encounter an academic curriculum or as many educational resources as White charter school students (Ascher and Wamba, 2005, p. 91). Further, research on White families’ school choice behaviors reveals that White families have a strong propensity to leave schools with high levels non-White students, even when controlling for the achievement and social class of schools (Roda and Wells, 2013; Renzulli and Evans, 2010; Saporito and Lareau, 1999; Saporito, 2003; Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Holme, 2002; Lankford and Wyckoff, 2005). Sikkink and Emerson (2008) argue that White parents associate the Blackness of a school with lower status, and that Whites with higher education levels are more invested in status hierarchies irrespective of their stated racial tolerance and interest in sending their children to integrated schools. In relation, private independent schools are typically segregated by race, ethnicity, and class and are more likely to be composed of White students, with White enrollment rates the highest in districts with the largest percentage of Black students (ibid; Levin, 1999).

These findings serve to remind us of the pervasive nature of White racism and racial privilege and Whites’ continued resistance to racially integrated spaces (Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011). In contrast to White families’ propensity to avoid student bodies composed of non-white students, studies have found that middle-class parents of color tend avoid poverty but do not consider the racial make-up of the school as a factor (Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Saporito and Lareau, 1999; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008). The following section provides an overview of research on parental school choice preferences and their relation to racial resegregation.

*Researching Parent Preferences*
According to national survey data, public school parents identify the following preferences when choosing schools: teacher quality, curriculum, and discipline (Richardson and Bushaw, 2015). A study of parental choices in NYC and suburban New Jersey districts echoes this finding, with parents ranking teacher quality, high test scores, safety and values highly when discussing their school preferences (Schneider, et al., 2000). Another national study suggests that parents limit their set of choices by location, then by level of safety and security, test scores, and match of the school program with their child’s characteristics; however, it is important to note that these self-reported preferences differed by class, with low-income parents less likely to make decisions based on test scores and more likely to prioritize location (Teske, 2012; Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011).

While these studies suggest that colorblind school-level factors shape parents’ school choices, they may be misleading in that they frame parents’ self-reported preferences as “concrete, measurable things instead of the social constructs that they are” (Holme, 2002, p. 182). Further, they only capture parents’ stated preferences while other school choice scholars argue that parents’ preferences can only be truly understood when compared with their actual school choice behavior. Guided by these methodological assumptions, research has found that the racial and socioeconomic composition of schools is a central factor in parents’ choices, with consistent evidence that all parents prefer schools with less low-income students yet White parents avoid schools predominately serving students of color (Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, 2012; Roda and Wells, 2013; Lubeinski, 2008; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008; Bell, 2008; James, 2013; Saporito, 2003; Weiher and Tedin, 2002; Holme, 2002).
Focusing on the effect of social class on preferences, Courtney Bell (2008) argues that parents’ interactions with schools shape their preferences and identifies class-based disparities in access to resources necessary to “interpret and mediate” family-school interactions (p. 144). For instance, she found that middle-class parents used external resources such as professional educator friends, books, private assessments, or tutoring services to mediate difficult interactions with schools. In contrast, low-income parents’ expectations for their children and related school preferences narrowed as a result of negative interactions with schools because they lacked capital to access other opinions or external assistance and had not experienced school success themselves. Further, parents’ knowledge of different schools and school choice strategies were shaped by social networks at their children’s school, with middle-class parents encountering “advantaging resources” such as advice about how to get their children into a selective school or recommendations for experts or consultants, while poor and working class parents encountered “remediating resources” such as summer school and mentoring programs for struggling students (p. 136). Finally, middle-class parents’ capital enabled them to adapt to changing circumstances - such as their child not passing a test or winning a lottery - by shifting their preferences, while poor and working class parents primarily encountered “roadblocks their resources could not overcome” (p. 140).

Research on social class and preferences also reveal that geographic proximity of the schools in question weighs heavily in parents’ school choice decision process, with the costs of transportation constricting parents’ choice sets, especially for low-income, single-parent, non-English speaking families (Teske, 2012). Adding necessary nuance to this finding, Bell
(2007; 2009) argues that geography plays a critical, albeit variable role, noting a critical difference between parents’ “spatial” preferences related to distance and commute time and “placed-based” preferences related to “the meanings people assign to particular locations” that are shaped by a place’s “history, peoples, and purposes within the political, social, and economic landscape” (2007, p. 378). Troubling the assumption that parents’ prefer a convenient location that requires less time and mileage, Bell (2007) argues that parents’ spatial preferences are also shaped by concerns for the quality of family life and their child’s development, the extent of parents’ social networks that facilitate carpooling or children staying at a friend or relative’s place after school, and parents’ willingness to ask members of their social network for help. Moreover, place-based preferences are shaped by perceptions of external features including neighborhood characteristics, the schools’ building exteriors, and students’ behavior outside of school as parents assumed that these factors reflected schools’ “safety, learning environment, students, and school quality” that are not necessarily affirmed by school visits or publically available information (Bell, 2007, p. 392).

Introducing the variable of race, Bell (2007) also found that middle-class urban parents of color were aware that it might be easier to find quality public schools if they moved to the suburbs, yet preferred urban schools because the city represented family, community, affirmative racial identities, and the culture they valued. She also found that urban middle-class Black parents’ experiences working or attending college outside of the city led to a stronger understanding of social stratification that shaped their preferences with mixed results. While some parents perceived choice as a means of exposure to White culture that would provide their children with the social and cultural capital they would need to compete
in society, others choose predominately Black schools believing that exposure to African American culture will protect and nurture their children’s positive identity development.

In NYC, Adriana Villavicencio (2013) also found that class and race shape parents’ school preferences. On one hand, White and Asian parents with more social and economic capital living in a more economically and racially diverse school district perceived choice as a means to realize their preference for a unique curriculum and/or racial diversity. On the other hand, low-income Black and Latino charter school parents living in a low-income and racially isolated school district perceived choice as a means of escape from their underperforming neighborhood public schools. Villavicencio argues that low-income parents of color prefer charters over the neighborhood schools because they believed that the charter they selected, however dissatisfied they were, was the only “good” option. Parents of color highlighting the paucity of “reasonable alternatives” to their neighborhood public schools in their separate and unequal school district exemplifies the concept of “choice as racial subordination” created by “racialized constraints” on parents’ preferences wherein choice often “manifests as patterns of residential housing segregation” (James, 2013, p. 1093).

In her study of a gentrifying urban neighborhood and school, Linn Posey-Maddox (2013) found that all parents, regardless of race or class, chose the school because of the “diversity” of the student body. All parents perceived individual and collective benefits of their children’s social exposure to diverse racial or cultural groups. However, while middle-class parents of color associated diversity with increased access to educational opportunities and resources found in schools with White students, White parents worried that socioeconomic
diversity would lead to a less academically challenging school environment for their children and identified ways they supplement their children’s educations as a result.

Finally, school choice scholars have made the case that deregulated schools of choice have the power to choose students just as much as families have the power to choose schools. For instance, schools of choice have recruitment practices and admissions policies that influence which families know about specific schools of choice, apply to them, and are admitted or rejected (Ascher and Wamba, 2005). In NYC, Jennifer Jennings (2010) found that two out of three small high school principals used multiple strategies to recruit and enroll a higher-achieving student body and counsel out or deflect lower-achieving students, rationalizing that “leaving their student intakes to chance meant jeopardizing the survival of their schools” in the current high-stakes test-based accountability context (p. 244). Similarly, Welner and Howe (2005) argue that unofficial charter practices of “steering away” or “counseling out” special education students is a response to competition and accountability pressures (p. 94).

The next section of this literature review examines this relationship between test-based accountability policies and school choice, with specific attention to the assumptions undergirding and effects of contemporary school choice policies on student achievement and the apparent disconnect between policymakers’ and parents’ beliefs and values.

**Choice as the Pursuit of Academic Excellence**

A key measure of racial educational equity is academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores. Education researchers have identified a racial achievement gap strongly correlated with racial socioeconomic disparities between Black and Hispanic students and Whites since the 1970s when the federal government began using a
standardized assessment to measure and compare reading and math skills across race and class (CEPA). Researchers have long identified a wide range of causes and solutions for the racial achievement gap, but the discourse of “no excuses” for the racial achievement gap is most relevant for this study. The “no excuses” platform argues that researchers and school leaders concerned with systemic economic inequality use concentrated poverty and “dysfunctional families” as excuses for “widespread, chronic educational failure” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 43). Proponents of this platform argue that schools and districts should stop making excuses for their failure to address the achievement gap and start replicating strategies used by charters that ”do splendidly on state assessments” such as “back-to-basics” curricula, hiring non-union teachers who work extended school schedules, and strict disciplinary policies that include parent contracts (ibid, p. 49).

A key characteristic of post-civil rights and post-Brown educational policy is No Child Left Behind Act’s (NCLB) framing of racial educational equity as “academic excellence” guided by academic standards, measured by standardized testing outputs, and guaranteed through accountability systems that expand market-based school choice options so that families trapped in under-performing schools can access seats in high-performing schools (Scott, 2011; Andre-Bechely, 2005). NCLB was a 2001 reauthorization of federal education policy that provides supplemental funding to Title I schools characterized by high percentages of low-income students, the majority of whom are students of color. NCLB tied funding to test performance, with accountability sanctions for schools and districts failing to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on tests. School choice constituted a key element of the school accountability plan, with schools failing to make AYP for two years forced to offer
students the right to transfer to a better performing public school with transportation funded out of the school budget. After five years, NCLB required schools that failed to meet AYP to “restructure” governance, with one option being conversion into a charter school (Ravitch, 2010). It is important to recognize that even test-based accountability and expanded choice provisions are top-down education reform efforts with historical roots in people of colors’ activism such as NYC’s People’s Board of Education 1966 demand that the administration hold teachers in their neighborhood public schools accountable through evaluating student achievement or the Harlem Nine’s 1958 campaign for “Freedom of Choice of Junior High Schools” (Lewis, 2013; Baker, 2003, p. 74).

As an accountability mechanism, school choice was assumed to promote demand-side school reform by granting parents the right to escape underperforming public schools and choose better-performing schools, thus reforming schools and addressing the achievement gap through consumer pressure. Choice was also assumed to promote supply-side school reform by forcing all schools to improve outcomes and make innovations in order to attract and retain customers, thus reforming public schools through market competition. This pursuit of racial educational equity through accountability and choice combines individual responsibility and liberty to choose with the collective benefit of replicating school models with strong test outcomes. Importantly, in order for this market-based reform of public schools to promote both individual and collective benefits, school choice policies must improve student outcomes in schools of choice and in the traditional public schools. However, critics of market-based reform have noted that there is a fundamental tension between competition between schools and that of collaboration (Ni and Arsen, 2010;
Moreover, choice as a public school reform strategy is premised on the assumption that parents will choose to leave under-performing schools and/or enroll their children high-performing schools, yet school choice research has proven this assumption to be unfounded (Bell, 2007).

The sections that follow provide an overview of the debate about whether school choice policies have improved academic achievement in schools of choice and across public school systems and the extent to which parents consider schools’ standardized test scores when developing their choice sets, or “banks of reasonable school choice options” (Bell, 2008; 2009).

School Choice and Achievement

The introduction of innovation and market competition through contemporary school choice policies was originally assumed to foster increased academic achievement within schools of choice through innovation and across public schools through replication of innovative best practices and market pressure. Historically, research focused on academic achievement in vouchers and charters has been ideologically divided, with opponents finding few and advocates finding significant gains. However, standardized test data has accumulated since the 1990s when voucher and charter movements began, allowing for less politicized findings. Studies of voucher programs have found small to no educational gains for voucher students or students remaining in public schools (Ravitch, 2010). Charters, which garner significantly more public and political support, have proven to have a mixed impact on academic achievement, with findings that have changed over time as the movement has expanded and matured and as evidence of its impact has grown in scope and quality.
Federal and state charter school policies are built on the assumption that charters promote academic achievement better than traditional public schools because their time-limited contracts hold them more accountable to demonstrate academic gains in exchange for operational autonomy and the ability to innovate. According to the laws, charters that do not promote academic achievement, as measured by standardized test scores, will be closed. Evaluations of charter performance range in empirical rigor and are complicated by the facts that charter policies differ by state and that charters differ by locality, mission, and design; however, over two decades of charter school sector growth and increasing use of standardized assessment across states has allowed researchers to weigh this policy assumption against the outcomes. Gary Miron’s (2010) review of large-scale studies suggests that charter school students, on average, perform similarly on standardized tests as traditional public school students, with national and multi-state evaluations trending negative while single school or small evaluations trend positive.

Evaluations of charter standardized test performance have trended positive over time. In 2009 the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that, on average, national charter sector performs no better than traditional public schools and warned that a “disturbing – and far-reaching - subset of poorly performing charter schools” exists within the charter sector (p.7; Lubeinski and Weitzel, 2010). However, CREDO’s 2013 report on the charter sector in 27 states and large districts, which included New York and NYC, found charter school performance had improved since 2009, with an upward trend of reading and math gains. Disaggregating the data, charter achievement gains were shown to be larger in states or districts with overall poor performance on national assessments for elementary and
middle schools and for students categorized as: poor, English Language Learners (ELLs), Black, Black and poor, Hispanic and poor, Hispanic and ELL, and special education. CREDO’s 2013 report on NYC charters found that 22 percent had more positive learning gains in reading and 63 percent in math when compared to traditional public schools and that there were better results for low-income Black and Hispanic students. Further, CREDO’s 2015 study of 41 urban areas determined that, in the aggregate, urban charter schools provide higher levels of annual academic growth, specifically for students categorized as Black, Hispanic, low-income, and special education.

While there is some evidence that charters promote academic achievement, particularly in large urban districts serving low-income students of color, it is still unclear whether the competitive effect created by charters has been positive for students who remain in neighborhood public schools. Reviews of the limited research on the competitive effect of charter schools on traditional public school outcomes finds mixed results that appear to be dependent on state charter school policy (Ni and Arsen, 2010). Beyond charters, a review of the impact of increasing market-based competition is similarly mixed, with some evidence of positive impact, little evidence of negative impact, and many studies finding no effect on traditional public school achievement (Belfield and Levin, 2005). However, while choice advocates initially posited that deregulated schools will promote academic achievement through innovative practices that traditional public schools could replicate, research suggests that, on average, charter innovation is primarily concentrated in school marketing and management practices, not instructional and pedagogical strategies that more regulated traditional public schools can pilot and adopt (Lubeinski and Weitzel, 2010).
Debates about whether charters promote achievement have shifted to debates about why it is that some schools of choice outperform traditional public schools on standardized tests. In an era of high-stakes test-based accountability for schools, there is a perverse incentive for schools to attract students who test well and repel or reject students who do not. As mentioned earlier, scholars highlight the fact that school choice policies allow schools of choice to choose students just as much as families choose schools and research has identified practices used by schools of choice to attract high-achieving and deflect low-achieving students (Jennings, 2010; Ascher and Wamba, 2005). Research on charters has also identified practices of “creaming” the student body by “steering away” or “counseling out” low-achieving students that involve attracting more motivated parents and detractiong the opposite through the requirement of a parent contract; however, it is important to note that evidence of charters “creaming” students is largely anecdotal (Welner and Howe, 2005; Garcia, 2010).

In sum, there are indications that urban charters are increasingly promoting charter school student achievement on standardized tests, especially for Black, Hispanic, low-income, and special education students living in large urban districts like NYC; however, evidence regarding the impact of competitive market forces on traditional public schools is limited and mixed. The following literature is focused on understanding why many parents do not take advantage of their NYC right to transfer out of persistently underperforming schools or why they often do not choose high-performing schools. Research on parents’ school choice preferences demonstrates that parents self-report strong preferences for schools with strong test scores, yet tend choose schools with student body demographics that are similar to their
own, often with lower test scores than the schools that they exited (Garcia, 2010). The following scholars debate whether this disconnect between parents’ stated preferences and choices is caused by a lack of quality information or by socioeconomic inequality, as parents’ access to information about schools is largely determined by their social class and social networks.

*Researching School Choice Information*

Some school choice scholars focus their research on understanding what type of school choice information parents seek, how parents understand and make use of information, and whether disparities in access to information or available seats constrains school choices. The economic theory undergirding the current era of school choice policy assumes that the likelihood of markets providing desirable outcomes (in this case, higher rates of academic achievement and high-performing schools) increases in proportion to the amount of informed consumers (Schneider, et al., 2000). Thus, school choice only promotes academic achievement in a market-based model if parents and families make “good,” “well informed” choices by choosing high-performing schools (ibid). Research has found that publicly accessible information about schools’ academic outcomes required by NCLB (such as NYC’s School Quality Reports) and aggregated by independent organizations has not led parents to choose high-performing schools in significant numbers (Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, 2012; Bell, 2007).

Attempting to explain this phenomenon, scholars identify an information gap for low-income and language minority urban parents, with many school districts using limited translations and posting the majority of official information about schools online although many low-
income families have poor or limited access to and experience with computers and the Internet (Teske, 2012; Perez, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj, 2009, 2014). Jeffrey Henig (1994) posits that some parents, especially single parents living in urban areas, are less informed because they do not have the time to do extensive research; however, studies have also demonstrated that, regardless of class, most parents tend to have a limited understanding of school choice policies and procedures and lack accurate and useful information about schools in their district (Sattin-Bajaj, 2009; Hess, 2010). Moreover, Paul Teske (2012) argues that inequity created by constrained access to high quality information about school choice is exacerbated when the school system contains many types of choices, as is the case in NYC.

Other researchers are concerned with the extent to which necessary information about all options is “of sufficient quality, widely available and equitably distributed” so that all parents are able to make well-reasoned and -informed school decisions (Lubienski, 2008). Caroline Sattin-Bajaj (2009; 2014) highlights a troubling disconnect between the strategies that NYCDOE uses to communicate high school admissions information and Spanish-speaking Latin American immigrant parents’ backgrounds and literacy abilities. She found that the NYCDOE demonstrates limited sensitivity to the needs and challenges of immigrant families because publications and personnel rarely mentioned school quality measures such as graduation rates or tests scores to parents as factors to consider when selecting schools; the quality of translation and interpretation at events varied considerably; the translation services were insufficient; and the NYCDOE relied heavily on web-based resources and the Internet as means of information dissemination.

*Social Networks Influence Preferences and Choices*
Most scholars agree that parents primarily access school information through their social networks and report that “soft” or “intuitive” information gleaned from conversations with other parents, school staff, and school visits is far more important in the school choice decision process than “hard data” such as test score information gleaned through print or online materials or information centers (Holme, 2002; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008; Andre-Bechely, 2005; Teske, 2012, p. 83). Research focused on social networks and school choice information finds that parents’ socioeconomic status, social capital, and educational levels influence parents’ school preferences and choices. These researchers use evidence of “asymmetries” of access to information to explain why many low-income, less-educated parents do not pull their children out of poorly performing schools or do not choose better-performing schools (Villavicencio, 2012; Bell, 2007). It is essential to note that this is not a question of different levels of parental intelligence, agency, or motivation but a question of whether all parents have equal access to the capital - money, time, connections, knowledge, and skills - required for a thorough and well-informed search (Villavicencio, 2012).

Courtney Bell (2008; 2009) argues that all parents use rational reasoning while engaging in the school choice process, yet the range of schools that parents are aware of and actually consider as reasonable options differs dramatically by social class. According to Bell, the “choice sets,” or banks of reasonable options, found in middle-class social networks contain greater percentages of non-failing, selective and tuition-based schools than those of poor and working-class parents. This suggests that the information about schools that parents receive and act upon is predominately shaped by the social class composition of their social network; thus, people living in a class-stratified society rationally access, depend upon, and make
decisions using disparate banks of information and reproduce social stratification through parental choice.

Madeline Perez’s (2011) analysis of the NYC high school choice process found that middle-class families draw upon and regularly verify multiple sources of information accessed through school visits/open houses, consultants, social networks containing educational experts, and the high school directory. In contrast, low-income parents glean, and often take at face value, limited information from only a few sources including an enormous high school directory, small social networks of economically and socially isolated family members with little knowledge of navigating the process, and middle school staff who lack the dominant cultural capital necessary for successfully navigating high school choice. Finally, she found that parent-school interactions shape parents’ choice process, with school staff serving middle-class students reinforcing a targeted and specific high school search process early on while school staff serving low-income students modeling generic search strategies just weeks before the school applications are due.

Adriana Villavicencio’s (2013) analysis of NYC charter parents found that White, Asian and affluent parents are more likely to choose charters only after the charters have established a good reputation within their social networks, and that they are more also willing and likely to leave charters than parents of color when dissatisfied. On the other hand, Black, Latino, and low-income parents feel as though they have to stay in a charter despite dissatisfaction because they feel they have no other reasonable options. Villavicencio argues that these differences in preferences and choices exemplify how social networks create disparities in access to schools, resources, and knowledge of how to navigate the system. In addition, her
work is an important reminder that the school choice process does not end with selection of schools, as many dissatisfied parents had to determine the next steps they are willing and able to make with their disparate knowledge and resources. Moreover, she noted a marked difference in the knowledge and resources of families who chose a charter in its first years who had engaged in an active and extensive initial school search and families who were new to the charter and had conducted a minimal and passive search involving passing by the building or receiving an application in the mail. This suggests that the type of information and resources necessary to successfully navigate the choice process shift over time as charters mature and become more readily accessible, and that the demographics of charters shift accordingly.

While the social practice of accessing information through social networks may seem common sense and benign, the prevailing concern is that White and middle- or upper-class families are likelier to have access to the types of social networks (e.g., social networks composed of teachers or principals) that provide higher quality and more reliable information about all schools including strategies to access seats in the most culturally valued schools (Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, 2012). This also has implications for school choice policies maintaining or exacerbating segregation as research suggests that highly educated and more affluent White parents are embedded in social networks that lack ties to accurate information about racially integrated schools, thus have a tendency to avoid schools with high proportions of Black students regardless of test scores or social class (Sikkink and Emerson, 2008). On the other hand, low-income parents and people of color who are primary stakeholders of market-based reforms designed to promote racial educational
equity are less likely to be connected to people who know about high-performing schools or how to work the choice system and more reliant on institutions that provide them with less timely and lower-quality information.

This literature on the poor quality of and constrained access to information about schools’ track record of academic achievement demonstrates yet another way that school choice policies can promote liberty and exacerbate social stratification, racial segregation, and the racial achievement gap. Some scholars argue that the quality of and access to school information must be improved in order to better help low-income parents and parents of color make well-informed decisions and choose high-performing schools. However, while the government is using market-based choice policies to promote academic achievement on standardized tests, research demonstrates that parental preferences are far more expansive, complex, and subjective than a preference for a school with high test scores.

In addition, it is also important to recognize that there is an unfortunate abundance of poorly performing schools in NYC and similar urban school districts. In 2015 the New York State identified 91 NYC public schools as “failing” and identified 314 underperforming schools as “focus” or “priority” schools in need of intervention due to low test performance, lack of test progress, or low graduation rates for low-income students, students of color, ELLS, and students with disabilities; in contrast, the NYS identified just 110 schools as “high-achieving” and “high progress” schools (Wall, 2015; NYSED 2016). Thus, even if parents were able to access better information about high-achieving schools, they must choose from and compete for seats in a market comprised of vastly more underperforming than high-achieving public schools. This study contributes to school choice literature in analyzing parents’ varied
preferences and choices within this bounded context. However, when parents described the factors they considered when developing their elementary choice sets, achievement and test scores were rarely high priorities. Instead, parents generally expressed aversion to their culturally devalued neighborhoods and public schools and a preference for culturally valued schools of choice that they perceived as designed to impart the dominant knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values necessary for their children’s social mobility in a racially segregated and class stratified society.

**Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is multifaceted. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the relationship between cultural reproduction through schools and class stratification serves as the foundation for this analysis of parental school preferences and choices. However, his theory was generated from a class-based analysis of the French school system during the 1970s and excludes the variables of race and racism, thus it is insufficient for an analysis of contemporary urban Black parents’ school choice narratives. Extending his theory of social stratification through cultural reproduction to the contemporary context of predominately low-income and racially segregated urban Black neighborhoods in the U.S. requires an integration of concepts generated from analyses of people of colors’ perspectives and racialized experiences (Lofton and Earl, 2015). For this reason, Osamudia James’s theory of school choice as “racial subordination” is used to outline the ways in which the social game of school choice is unequal for parents of color and Thomas Pedroni’s (2007) theory of “subaltern agency” is used to analyze parents’ perceptions of this unequal playing field and the rational and tactical school choice work they engaged in. Finally, this study employs
Patricia Hill Collin’s (2009, 1994) Black feminist theory of a Black collective standpoint to identify the common school choice challenges Black parents encounter and to propose school choice policy solutions from Black parents’ collective perspective.

Best known for his analysis of relations between cultural reproduction and social reproduction in education, Bourdieu (1973, 1998) argues that educational institutions contribute to the reproduction and unequal distribution of cultural values that lead to the reproduction and legitimization of existing social stratification. This position remains a relevant and powerful analytical lens through which education scholars understand how policies designed to promote liberty and equity like universal access to public schooling contribute to social stratification. This dissertation is a “relational” and “generative” application of his concepts within the context of Black Brooklyn neighborhoods during the first decade of the 21st century and his concepts serve as a foundational conceptual framework for several reasons (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 13).

First, Bourdieu’s concepts engage the debate over whether schooling promotes social change and mobility or whether it reproduces and maintains social hierarchies and disadvantage. An extensive review of the school choice debates and related research suggests that, at best, every step forward towards increased liberty and racial educational equity that school choice policies provide is counteracted with entrenched social stratification. Bourdieu believes that schools and school systems maintain and engender social stratification through cultural reproduction, a process that will be explained in the section that follows. This study examines how school choice policies continue to be limited in their ability to realize their promise of liberty and equity for Black families, regardless of social class, revealing a
contemporary process of social stratification through schooling in Black Brooklyn neighborhoods experiencing rapid charter school proliferation.

Secondly, Bourdieu asserts that social relations are at the core of practices that reproduce stratification and that understanding the cultural and social background of the people who make up social spaces is vital to understanding how reproduction functions. Home and family life play a significant role in Bourdieu’s theory of stratification, as the extent to which the cultural dispositions and values a child acquires before schooling matches school culture determines how well a student is received and performs in that school (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This perspective has driven sociological analyses of the stratifying effect on parent-school or home-school relations that reveal class disparities in the social and cultural resources and strategies parents employ in efforts to improve their children’s social position through schooling (Perez, 2009; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Ball et al., 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Reay and Ball, 1998). In fact, Annette Lareau (2013) found parent-school interactions to be so influential on students’ educational experiences and outcomes that she refers to them as “the lifeblood of the stratification process” (p. 278).

Furthermore, although Bourdieu believes that schools inevitably promote social stratification through the process of cultural reproduction, parents are not considered victims or dupes in his model; instead, they are understood to make rational and tactical decisions for their children based upon the dispositions, knowledge, and skills they have acquired through life and in their assessment of the social game of education and their chances within it. In other words, parents in historically oppressed or relatively disadvantaged social groups are not victims of the dominant class who are tricked into
feeling empowered by policies like school choice; on the contrary, they know that the social
games that they are compelled to play are rigged against them and they are agentic to the
extent that they activate the resources they have to the best of their ability within an uneven
playing field.

This is similar to Pedroni’s (2007) concept of “subaltern agency” in which dominated groups
maintain a “tactical relationship to power, sensing the need to act within the spaces that the
powerful provide, sometimes in ways that creatively turn the strategic deployments of the
powerful back against the powerful, and other times in ways that are ultimately self-
defeating” (p. 37-38). In this sense, school choice for parents of color involves “subaltern
processes of ‘making do’ with the educational options that are available to them” and
adopting, subverting or resisting “circulating [dominant] discourses and their concomitant
subject positions” (ibid, p. 72). This study conceptualizes Black parents as rational and
tactical subaltern decision makers who make the best of their options in an inequitable
educational marketplace and adopt, subvert, and reject dominant narratives such as such the
cultural deficit of Black families or blaming teachers for public school failure.

The following sections explain why and how this study employed Bourdieu’s concepts of
field, capital, and habitus as analytical lenses through which parents’ school choice narratives
were analyzed. When relevant, concepts generated from the perspectives and racialized
experiences of Black people have been integrated in order to make Bourdieu’s concepts
appropriate and relevant for an analysis of contemporary urban Black American parents’
school choice narratives.

Field
Bourdieu conceptualizes the social world as divided into fields that serve as metaphors for abstract social spaces comprised of institutions, agents, discourses, practices, and values where individuals compete to acquire and exchange forms of capital to maintain or exceed their social position in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1999b; Posey-Maddox, 2014). The field in question for this study is the school choice marketplace in Brooklyn, NY. Bourdieu believes that fields contain hierarchies wherein dominant groups work to produce and reproduce official “rules of the social game” that shape peoples’ attitudes and social practices and foster individual or group conflict over what constitutes official or dominant resources and how resources should be distributed (Webb et al., 2002, p. 21). This study refers to these “rules” as dominant narratives. In the field of education, politicians, business leaders, and educational bureaucrats have used their dominant position to produce and maintain dominant narratives that were debated in the literature review, will be identified in the Methodology chapter that follows, and were used to ground data analysis. In addition to analyzing how dominant school choice narratives shape parents’ school choice perspectives and practices, this study also reveals ways in which parents challenged, rejected, or subverted them as well.

Bourdieu (1986) uses the concept of capital to explain social competition for resources in class-divided societies wherein “everything is not equally possible or impossible” because scarcity drives the value of goods and individuals use various forms of capital to compete for scarce goods (p. 15). This study conceptualizes school choice as a social game wherein Black families activate various forms of capital at their disposal in order to compete against other, often more racially privileged, families for access to are available seats in quality public
schools with the objective of promoting their children’s social mobility. Bourdieu (1986) argues that capital has three convertible and related forms that individuals and groups attempt to acquire and transmit to kin in order to maintain or better their social position: economic capital, or material wealth; cultural capital, or tastes, attributes, knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions; and social capital, or group membership. These various and interrelated forms of capital are accumulated over time and their value is dependent on the field in which it is employed and its level of scarcity within that field.

Economic capital

Economic capital, the least abstract of the three forms of capital, is defined as that which is “immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242). Families transmit economic capital through mechanisms like trusts and property, a process of hereditary transmission that is explicit, easily identifiable, and often critiqued for being unfair. Economic capital is at the root of all other types of capital because a major objective in other forms of capital acquisition is conversion into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Regarding school choice, economic capital determines parents’ ability to pay for private school tuition, a school choice consultant, or afford residential choice by moving to an area with quality public schools. Economic capital factored most significantly in this study through real estate, with parents’ socioeconomic status and racist housing practices delimiting their ability to escape the effects of concentrated urban poverty through a residential relocation. Economic capital factored in some parents’ ability to quit the inequitable social game of public school choice and pay private school tuition or with the generational inheritance of real estate, which
allowed at least one set of parents to afford tuition payments. Parents’ varied access to economic capital will be identified by commonly used socio-economic categories of low-income, middle-class, and affluent.

*Social Capital*

Social capital is understood to be actual or potential resources linked to group membership (Bourdieu, 1986). The extent of an individual’s social capital depends on the size of the network of connections within the group and on the volume of economic, cultural, or symbolic capital possessed by its members (ibid). Social capital can be converted into economic capital, such as through a financial loan. More germane to this study, is the conversion of social capital to cultural capital, as research demonstrates that the social class composition of parents’ social networks significantly shapes their school choice knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Teske, 2012; Bell, 2007, 2009; Villavicencio, 2013; Elacqua, 2005).

This study finds that parents conceptualized choice as a means to avoid socially stigmatized and culturally devalued social networks in their predominately low-income and racially isolated neighborhood schools and seek more socially valued or distinctive social networks connected to schools of choice, often located in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. In fact, many parents expressed a strong preference for and engaged in pursuit of “diverse” schools, indicating their efforts to help their children build relationships and join a school social network composed of less economically and racially isolated and socially devalued families. This study frames school choice as parents’ pursuit of convertible social capital for themselves and their children and analyzes parents’ group membership and relationships as it relates to school choice.
While recognizing that economic capital significantly determines access to educational resources, Bourdieu (1986) argues that “the domestic transmission of cultural capital” is the “best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment” that is “subject to heavily disguised or even invisible hereditary transmission” (p. 17). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) conceptualized cultural capital to explain why children from different social classes have persistently disparate academic outcomes and why schools tend to reproduce existing social relations and inequalities instead of promoting social change. Cultural capital originally referred to knowledge of elite music, history, art and literature but contemporary Bourdieu scholars have reframed it as “relatively rare, high-status cultural and linguistic knowledge, skills, and dispositions passed from one generation to the next” or “a form of value associated with culturally authorized tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards” (Perez, 2009, p. 139; Webb et al., 2002, p. x). For the purposes of this study cultural capital will refer to parents’ school choice knowledge skills and their dispositions towards, tastes for, and consumption patterns with distinct schools. Further, it also refers to the type of cultural training they desire for their children with the objective of promoting social mobility.

Two forms of cultural capital are relevant to this study: 1) *individualized or embodied*, through “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”; 2) *objectified* through cultural goods such as art and books, qualifications, and technology (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17). Individuals often acquire *embodied* cultural capital unconsciously, first through familial socialization, then through more deliberate cultural inculcation via formal schooling; the
extent it can be acquired is determined by a combination of an individual's social position and socio-historical conditions (Webb et al., 2002). As consumers in a school choice marketplace, parents enter the school choice market with certain reserves of embodied cultural capital that influence the types of schools they are aware of and their ability to access schools. As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, parents also acquire embodied cultural capital during the school choice process, but they often felt as though that they acquired knowledge, skills, and dispositions too late in the game to have benefitted themselves or their children.

Parents also engage in school choice to help their child acquire embodied cultural capital. Historically, American schools have had the mission to produce and reproduce dominant cultural capital through engaging students in a study of the European cultural cannon and acculturating students to the values and dispositions of White Christian culture (Ravitch, 2000; Spring, 2012). The cultural reproduction of class stratification through schooling occurs because teachers draw and trade upon the native knowledge, skills, and dispositions of students from homes that consciously and unconsciously transmit such dominant cultural capital. One the other hand, students who have not been acculturated to dominant cultural capital in their homes are understood to be disadvantaged in schools from the start because teachers have a tendency to assume and expect, but not directly teach, forms of dominant cultural capital.

While cultural capital theory argues that dominant cultural groups use schools to maintain and reproduce their dominant position and class stratification, cultural deficit theory proposes that poor people maintain and reproduce their poverty through their cultural values, norms, and practices such as the predominance of female-headed Black households
or sagging pants (Lofton and Davis, 2015). Just as some socially prominent Black individuals like Bill Cosby embrace cultural deficit theory when identifying causes of intergenerational poverty for Black Americans, many parents in this study perceived their low-income neighbors as culturally deficient. This led them conceptualize school choice policy as a multi-faceted mechanism of racial educational equity with different class-based solutions for different class-based problems. They posited that certain schools of choice should be designed to ameliorate the perceived cultural deficits of their neighbors while school choice polices should also help them escape the negative influence of this perceived cultural poverty and access schools that impart the dominant cultural capital that they imparted to their children at home.

Adding another layer of complexity, Prudence Carter (2003) cautions that the literature on cultural capital theory tends to ignore its “ethnocentric bias” or variability, and proposes a theory of varying cultural capital with different exchange value in different social fields. Carter’s research with Black adolescent and young adults living in low-income government subsidized housing led her to argue that “non-dominant” cultural capital is equally important for people of color because they use it to “gain ‘authentic’ status positions within their respective communities” and better “navigate the terrain of ethnic authenticity” (Carter, 2003, p. 138). Perhaps a limitation of a study with a White researcher interviewing Black parents of elementary students, Chapter 5 will demonstrate that very few parents referred to non-dominant cultural capital acquisition when discussing their school choice preferences and experiences. Instead, most referenced efforts to distance their children from what they perceived as the cultural deficits of their neighborhood and acquire dominant cultural capital
through choice. This study revealed striking class differences in how parents embrace or reject the dominant narrative of cultural poverty and the type of dominant embodied cultural capital they prefer for their own and other children.

Exemplifying how objectified cultural capital applies to the relation between school choice and cultural reproduction of class stratification, British scholars Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (1998) frame schools as cultural goods and argue that the proliferation of diverse school types and the dominant narrative of “good parenting’...centered upon choice” have served to denigrate the symbolic conversion value of traditional public schools as a cultural good (p. 393). Dominant narratives about schools of choice like charters have framed them as valued cultural goods that families can convert to social capital by demarcating themselves from other parents and becoming members of school groups comprised of parents “like us” (ibid). In other words, school choice policies have created differentiated and hierarchical school systems and parents recognize that certain forms of public school choice, like charters or Gifted & Talented programs, have a stronger symbolic conversion value than others. Parents sought to acquire objectified cultural capital through school choice that they could symbolically convert to valued social capital in an effort to distinguish themselves from their neighbors.

As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, Black parents have largely internalized the dominant narratives of public school crisis, schools of choice as valued cultural goods, and school choice as good parenting. However, while they express a strong rejection of public schools and preference for private schools, they recognize that there are scarce culturally valued public schools in other, more affluent and White, neighborhoods; thus, they are actually
vocalizing a rejection of their culturally devalued neighborhoods and public schools. Many parents conceptualized school choice as a strategy to help their children escape or avoid the cultural devaluation associated with their neighborhoods. Even parents who enrolled their children in neighborhood charters or parochial schools perceived them as relatively valued cultural goods. In choosing schools of choice within or outside of their neighborhoods, they sought to acquire valued *objectified* cultural capital, thus attaining the status of the school and membership in culturally valued parent and student social networks.

*Habitus*

In order to analyze parents’ perceptions of neighborhoods, schools, and school choice policy, this study analyzes parents’ habitus or “set of internalized and durable dispositions toward culture, society, and one’s future” that is predominately learned in childhood, taken for granted, and a part of everyday life (Lareau, 2013, p. 276). These internalized and durable dispositions are understood to shape peoples’ attitudes, behaviors, values, and responses to circumstances, such as elementary school in a racially segregated and highly competitive school choice marketplace (Webb et al., 2002). Habitus is understood to operate at least partially on an unconscious level because people need to “think that the possibilities from which they choose are necessities, common sense, natural or inevitable” in order for the habitus to operate “smoothly and effectively” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 38).

This study first employs the concept of habitus to connect parents’ childhood experiences in the schools and neighborhoods with the rationale undergirding their school choice preferences and decisions. Following other school choice scholars, this study assumes that all parents draw meaning about schooling and school choice from their past experiences as
school children and acknowledges that Black parents have experienced intergenerational racialized inequity and subaltern resistance, often from within the same predominately low-income and racially segregated neighborhoods where they are now raising their own children (Lofton and Davis, 2015; Andre-Bechely, 2005; Sharkey, 2013). Parents’ attitudes, values and school choice practices originate in the socialization they received as children through their family and schools; thus, we cannot understand their school choice preferences and decisions nor their responses to school-related issues without understanding the conditions which shaped their beliefs, dispositions and values. For instance, an important element of parents’ rationale for engaging in choice is the generational experience of racial educational inequity and the practice of Black families enrolling children in parochial schools to escape neighborhood public schools. Further, habitus allows for the identification of the ways varied education, ethnicity, country of origin, and class influenced parents’ diverging perceptions of schools and school choice policy.

Secondly, this study employs habitus in order to analyze the extent to which parents internalize, subvert, or reject dominant narratives about schools and school choice policy despite the racialized constraints they encounter or the costs they incur when engaging in choice. The field of power, comprised of government, bureaucracy, economic and financial institutions, and media is understood to constantly shape habitus through dominant narratives circulated through authoritative publications, practices, and media that present their dominant vision of the social world (Webb et al., 2002). Following Foucault’s (1984, 2000) logic, liberal-democratic governments dominate the governed through the power of their consent and complicity, not through coercion or force. Governments employ dominant
narratives to create and orchestrate consent and complicity with several effects, including creating conditions under which the people come to perceive certain situations or outcomes as natural or inevitable, such as charter school proliferation, and others as unthinkable, such as reinstituting desegregation strategies or choosing the neighborhood public school.

The consent and compliance of the governed occurs not only because some people agree with it or believe it to be in their best interest, but also because some people perceive no alternative to what they recognize as oppressive situations (Webb et al., 2002). The habitus is created by and through doxa, or internalized “regimes of truth or forms of social orthodoxy” that the field of power circulates using dominant narratives and repeats using everyday language in the media to influence the way people understand their relationship to themselves, to each other, and to the government (Webb et al., 2002, p. 97). Doxa is characterized by an awareness of restricted options and distinguishes thinkable from unthinkable aspirations so as to limit any challenges to established social relations from dominated groups (ibid). This concept explains why people from dominated groups sometimes accept unfair conditions without recognizing oppression or alternatives and why they tend to “adjust themselves to ideology’s rules, even when it causes them suffering or internalized contradictions” (ibid, p. 96).

In regards to school choice policy, the NYC government has increasingly used dominant narratives to shift public perception of its role from one of promoting integration or guiding comprehensive public school reforms to enhancing individual choices and creating many choices within the school district. Government entities like NYC's Bloomberg administration have circulated dominant narratives about school choice through reports and media since
the turn of the century, causing many parents to perceive high-stakes competition for scarce seats in highly-valued NYC schools as taxing and inequitable but also inevitable.

*Group Habitus and Black Feminist Theory*

Habitus applies to the individual level, as everyone has different dispositions due to personal experiences that have shaped their attitudes and values, and to the collective level, as common situations collectively shape opinion and conduct. The purpose of this study is to understand the group habitus of Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black urban neighborhoods where charters have recently proliferated. To meet this end, this study employs Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) Black feminist concept of a US Black women’s group consciousness, or standpoint. Collins argues Black American women’s distinctive standpoint is derived from a combination of common oppressive experiences such as labor market victimization and unique concerns related to childcare, persistently failing inner-city public schools, and disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration for young Black men. She argues that common challenges related to historical conditions of “racial segregation in housing, education, and employment” have fostered a group-based, collective Black American women’s standpoint “characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (p. 191, 32). Following Collins, the goal of this dissertation is to better understand Black parents’ common challenges and the tensions arising from Black parents’ diverse responses engendered by dissimilar capital and individual habitus.

Black parents face the common challenges of protecting their children from the negative influences of concentrated poverty; making sense of the racial achievement gap and social
tension in Black neighborhoods created by charter school proliferation and co-location; engaging in high-stakes elementary school choice in a shifting and increasingly complex neighborhood school choice market; and accessing a seat in a culturally valued elementary school within racially segregated school districts. They also share the racialized experience of growing up Black and raising Black children in residentially segregated Black urban neighborhoods characterized by high-poverty and racially isolated public schools and proximity to concentrations of poverty. Their collective racialized experiences have shaped their values, beliefs, and dispositions toward the constructs of private and public schooling, their neighborhoods and the public institutions within, cultural reproduction and the relationship between schooling and social stratification, and the challenges they face and costs they incur in pursuit of educational equity and social mobility for their children. School choice policies designed to promote racial educational equity should be informed by their collective standpoint.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This study is guided by Dvora Yanow’s (2000) interpretive policy analysis methodology. The primary objective of interpretive policy analysis is to compare what specific policies mean to various stakeholder groups, members of which are understood as “situated knowers arguing from different standpoints” and “substantive experts of their domains” (p. 9 & 19). While a traditional approach to analysis of school choice policy might involve comparing test scores across different types of schools or surveying parents to elicit their opinions, interpretive policy analysis begins by determining the intended meaning of various school choice policies then contrasting these meanings with the “possibly variant and even incommensurable” interpretations and meanings that stakeholders, such as parents, make once policies are implemented (ibid, p.9). This study understands Black parents as “situated knowers” who make sense of and experience school choice from a unique and under-examined expert standpoint. Evaluating the consequences of over fifteen years of charter school policy in NYC, this study contrasts the policy objectives of increased liberty and racial educational equity through expanded choices and market-based reform with Black parents’ “local knowledge” and meanings, values, beliefs, and feelings about school choice and charters (ibid, p. 4). Specifically, interpretive policy analysis allows for an analysis of the various ways that the debate about school choice and charter schools is being “framed” by Black parents with the
assumption that what parents highlight or include in their school choice narratives reflects what they value (p. 11).

Qualitative methods were best suited for this study because their purpose is to “highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 1). Unlike quantitative studies, this study is not designed to prove or disprove a hypothesis; instead, this qualitative study seeks to analyze school choice policy from Black parents’ standpoint, identifying common meanings, values, beliefs and feelings Black parents express and challenges they encounter when choosing elementary schools for their children. In addition, school choice policies are premised on parents as liberated and rational consumers who drive competition and reform through their school choices, yet parents’ school choice perspectives and experiences are often relegated to the periphery of school choice research. This study centers Black parents in the school choice and charter school debates and qualitative methods allow participants to make sense of their thinking and experiences using their own language. Further, qualitative methods privilege context, allowing me to capture 20 families’ stories about a specific period in local and national public school history from the standpoint of Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where charters are disproportionately concentrated.

School choice stories or narratives were chosen as the analytical unit chosen for this interpretive policy analysis based on the belief that individuals “develop political consciousness by sharing stories and reflecting on personal experiences with institutions” and that the act of storytelling renders people’s “goals, preferences, and desires explicit, and
yields an everyday politics that enunciates grievances, interests, and aspirations which could be the beginnings of a political position or the material for political action” (Pattillo, 2015, p. 47). With the objective of promoting racial educational equity by proposing school choice policy critiques and solutions derived from Black parents’ standpoint, this study was also guided by the following critical race methodology principles (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002):

- Foreground race and racism in educational research, understanding both to be “endemic, permanent...central” and intersectional factors in defining and explaining individuals’ experiences with governance (p. 25).
- Focus on the intersectional raced, gendered, and classed experiences of people of color and view these experiences as sources of strength.
- Challenge traditional research paradigms and theories including objectivity and colorblindness and offer liberating or transformative solutions to racial subordination with the goal of eliminating racism and the empowerment of subordinated groups.
- Recognize inherently racist “majoritarian” or dominant narratives, such as those correlating the racial achievement gap to cultural deficit theories about parents of color, and challenge them by generating knowledge from people of colors’ “counter-stories” as told from their racialized positionality (ibid, p. 32).

**Setting**

Parents living in Brooklyn have a variety of public school choice options to consider and choose from. According to a 2016 InsideSchools.org search, in addition to district- and neighborhood-zoned schools and the option of using a variance or other unofficial means to access seats in a school outside of their zone, parents of elementary aged children have the
following public elementary school choices:

**Table 1. Forms of public elementary school choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>NYC</th>
<th>Brooklyn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gifted &amp; Talented Programs</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnet Schools</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unzoned (non-charter)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter elementary, K-8, and K-12 schools</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from InsideSchools.org (2016)

As evident in this table, charters significantly outnumber all other public schools of choice in NYC and Brooklyn; thus, this study recognizes all forms of school choice that parents consider while focusing on the consequences of charter school policy.

Brooklyn is home to more charters than any other borough, with a total of 85 charters serving elementary, middle, and high school students as of 2016. The dramatic rate of charter sector growth during a relatively short period of time is the reason that Brooklyn was selected as the setting for this study. More specifically, Brooklyn charter schools are disproportionately concentrated in the predominately low-income and racially segregated central Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bedford Stuyvesant (Bed Stuy), Ocean Hill, Brownsville, Prospect Heights, and Crown Heights. These “deeply isolated Black neighborhoods” are also home to a striking concentration of NYC’s most segregated Black public and charter schools (Fessenden, 2012). These neighborhoods were targeted for recruitment for these reasons; however, parents from the predominantly low-income and racially segregated Black
neighborhoods of Eats Flatbush, East New York, and Starret City also responded to flyers so these neighborhoods were added to the sample. The Brooklyn neighborhoods selected as sites for this study are encompassed within six CSDs outlined in the following NYCDOE map of 2016 Brooklyn Charter School locations.

Figure 2. Central Brooklyn Community School Districts selected for this study

Note: Map from New York City Department of Education Charter School Directory (2016)
Each neighborhood that was selected for the study is listed in the table below and organized into its Community School District (CSD) category. The numbers of charters in each CSD listed at the time of the interviews and the time of this writing is included to demonstrate where charters are concentrated and how quickly the charter sector is expanding. These charter school numbers served as the logic for the proportional sampling used for each neighborhood based on the assumption that families living in CSDs and neighborhoods with more charters have increased chances to be impacted by charter school policy. Using this logic, 10 of the 20 families selected for this study reside in the neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant (Bed Stuy).

Table 3. Distribution of charters and sample in central Brooklyn neighborhoods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSDs</th>
<th>Central Brooklyn Neighborhoods</th>
<th>Charters in 2011-12 (year of interviews)</th>
<th>Charters in 2016-17 (year of writing)</th>
<th>Proportional sampling of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed Stuy)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Crown Heights, Prospect Heights</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>East Flatbush, Canarsie</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>East New York, Starret City, Spring Creek, New Lots</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brownsville, Ocean Hill</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brooklyn charters</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage of Brooklyn charters</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from New York City Department of Education Charter School Directory (2011; 2016)
The neighborhoods selected for this study are described throughout the study as predominately low-income and racially segregated. The following maps visualize geographic trends of racial residential segregation, poverty, and median household levels based on 2010 U.S. Census data. The first map titled “Mapping Segregation” (Bloch et al., 2015) uses one color-coded dot per every 120 people from each racial census group to visualize residential racial segregation, with blue dots representing Black residents. Black Americans have been and continue to constitute the most residentially segregated racial/ethnic group in the U.S., a measure that continues to be a central indicator of racial inequality and/or progress because it is strongly associated with negative life outcomes including poor health and persistent economic inequality (Pattillo, 2005; Sharkey, 2013; Massey and Denton, 1993). The multigenerational persistence of racial residential segregation for Black urban families plays a significant role in Black parents’ school choice narratives because of the historical association between neighborhoods and zoned public school assignment and the contemporary use of choice to escape neighborhood schools.
Figure 4. Racial residential segregation in central Brooklyn


The second map titled “Poverty in Brooklyn” (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness) uses color-coding to visualize the percentage of people living below the federal poverty level for each neighborhood. This study describes the neighborhoods chosen for this study as *predominately* low-income in order to recognize the intra-neighborhood class diversity documented in these maps and represented by the sample. As the following maps demonstrate, the majority of residents living in the racially segregated Black neighborhoods chosen for this study have household incomes below the citywide median where more at least 20.9% or 41.8% live below the federal poverty level.
Figure 5. Poverty levels in central Brooklyn


The third map titled “Median Household Income in Brooklyn” (Keefe, 2012) uses color-coding to demonstrate the concentration of households below and above the 2012 citywide median income of $50,285.
Figure 6. Median household incomes in central Brooklyn

Note: Map from Keefe, J. (2012). Median Income | NYC Neighborhoods. WYNC.

The intra-racial and -neighborhood class diversity evident in these three maps plays a significant role in this study, with parents from different class positions having different preferences and making different choices for their children. Further, geography is a significant variable in that the majority of parents associated school choice with a means to help their children escape the negative influences of concentrated poverty. This study recognizes class diversity within Black neighborhoods, yet remains focused on the variables
of race and racism because research demonstrates that middle-class Blacks have limited residential options and tend to live in areas contiguous to concentrated poverty where they encounter significantly more violent crime than even the poorest Whites (Pattillo, 2005, p. 314).

It is also important to identify the neighborhoods of Park Slope and what some parents unofficially referred to as “downtown Brooklyn” (actually Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill) because they factor heavily in parents’ school choice narratives. As the preceding maps demonstrate, these Brooklyn neighborhoods are predominately White and have median incomes at and above then citywide median and $75,000 and very low levels (0-10.4%) of residents living under the federal poverty level. For these reasons, when these neighborhoods are referenced in the analysis that follows, they are described as predominately White and relatively affluent.

Finally, Black parents developing school choice preferences and making school choices while residing in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black neighborhoods must weigh the costs and benefits of an array of school choice options and are also influenced by a preponderance of both charters and underperforming public schools in their neighborhoods. The neighborhoods selected for this study also have disproportionate concentrations of struggling and failing public schools and remarkably few high-achieving schools as measured by standardized test scores and graduation rates (see the table that follows). In February of 2016 New York State Education Department’s Office of Accountability released academic accountability reports using the following new federal accountability categories for Title I
public schools, or schools that serve high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families:

- Priority or Failing schools have been monitored by the state for the preceding three years and have been among the bottom 5% in state test performance or have graduation rates below 60-percent; many of these schools have been failing for a decade. In NYS, 93-percent of children attending these schools are students of color and 82-percent are low-income.

- Focus schools are among the lowest performing in the state for accountability subgroups (low-income students, racial or ethnic groups, students with disabilities, or English Language Learners) and have not made progress with these subgroups for a number of years. In addition to identifying individual schools, NYS identified NYC as a focus district because it has a concentration of priority schools. Notably, priority districts are mandated by NYS to provide all students enrolled students in priority schools with the option to transfer to another public school within the district that is not a priority or focus school.

- Reward schools are recognized as high-performance or making high-progress on a variety of measures and they serve as models in the district.
Table 7. NYS Academic Accountability Reports for central Brooklyn K-12 public schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSDs</th>
<th>Central Brooklyn Neighborhoods</th>
<th>Priority/Failing</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Reward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bedford-Stuyvesant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Crown Heights, Prospect Heights</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>East Flatbush, Canarsie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>East New York, Starret City, Spring Creek, New Lots</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brownsville, Ocean Hill</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals  | 17            | 38            | 2     |
Number of Brooklyn schools identified       | 23            | 48            | 18   |
Percentage of Brooklyn schools identified   | 73.9%         | 79.16%        | 11.1%|

Note: Data from New York State Education Department’s Office of Accountability (2016)

This table demonstrates that underperforming schools are disproportionately concentrated in the racially segregated and predominately low-income Black neighborhoods selected for this study. This abundance of low-quality school options in their neighborhoods is similar to other large urban school districts and central to understanding the racial politics of school choice for Black parents in NYC and similar cities (Pattillo, 2015). In contrast, the predominately White and relatively affluent neighborhoods of Park Slope and what some parents refer to as “downtown” Brooklyn are encompassed within CSD 15, which has 0 schools with priority status and 1 school with focus status.

Sample

Recruitment for and participation in this study was limited to elementary school parents who identified as either Black or African American and resided in one of the neighborhoods
listed above. Participation in the study was limited to Black parents because Black children are overrepresented in charter schools on a local and national level (Frankenberg et al., 2010) and because Black families have a unique and complicated relationship to public schooling and school choice, including a long history of founding and attending alternative schools (Scott, 2011; Stulberg, 2004, 2008). This sample criterion allowed me to situate data collected during this study within a larger historical experience with racial segregation and over a century of Black struggle for racial educational equity. Participation was limited to parents with at least one elementary aged child because, unlike middle or high school choice where the child may have some say in the decision, parents are solely responsible for elementary school choice. Further, the majority of NYC charters serve elementary students (73% in 2016-2017); thus, while the majority of children have historically attended their zoned elementary school in NYC, parents making elementary school choices are most impacted by charter school policy. Finally, while much is known about the inequities of the high school choice process in NYC (Perez, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, 2009; Jennings, 2010), this study's focus on elementary school choice addresses this gap in NYC school choice research.

This study centers the perspectives and experiences of Black parents of elementary school children living in these predominately low-income and racially segregated Brooklyn neighborhoods where charter schools are concentrated as an interpretive “community of meaning” (Yanow, 2000, p.10). The school choice narratives collected by this study provide perspective on the consequences of charter school policy from the diverse standpoints of Black parents who are similar in respect to race, residency in low-income and racially
segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods, role in the family, and motivation to participate in this study, but different in regards to educational background, culture, social class, gender, and school choice preferences, choices and experiences. In other words, this study recognizes a diversity of class, culture, education, and occupational status in Black neighborhoods and interrogates the effects of that diversity.

The sample was developed using the strategy of “purposeful sampling,” or recruiting parents from a range of neighborhoods, social networks and school choice experiences in order to best capture the range of preferences, choices, perceptions, and experiences of Black parents (Seidman, 2006). Sample criterion included participants’ identification as Black or African American, residence in one of the selected neighborhoods, and at least one elementary-aged child at the time of the interview. It is important to note here that while the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) invited parents to share what they thought about school choice and charters, charter school enrollment was not a selection criterion. In other words, this is an analysis of the impact of charter school policy from the standpoint of Black parents who are impacted by the rapid proliferation of charters in their neighborhoods, not only from the standpoint of Black parents who enrolled their children in charter schools. (This is related to the fact that overly simplistic categories like “charter school parents” would problematically veil the fact that over half of the parents who participated in this study chose more than one school type for at least one of their children, or moved their children between different school types during the course of their elementary years.) Recruitment flyers were posted in select neighborhood libraries, community centers, churches, apartment buildings, laundromats, hair salons, and cafes. They were also distributed during presentations at
public meetings in each selected CSD, posted on neighborhood-specific parent listservs such as “Bedford-Stuyvesant Parents,” and shared by work and graduate school colleagues via email. Because at least a quarter of participants were referred by others who had participated in the study, this is partially a snowball sample as well.

The sample for this study is comprised of a total of 22 individuals or 20 families (two interviews were conducted with couples). Because the majority of these families were headed by single mothers (11), and for the sake of simplicity, this study will refer to a sample of 20 parents throughout the analysis that follows. This sample size of 20 parents was chosen to strengthen the validity of the interview data through relatively robust opportunities to “check the comments of one participant against those of others” (Seidman, 2013, p. 27). Importantly, 2 of the 20 participants were interested and invested in the topic, yet were not actively involved in choice work for their children (single fathers who did not have full-custody of their children). For this reason, their perspectives and narratives are significantly limited in the analysis chapters to the extent to which they internalize, subvert, and/or reject dominant narratives about schools and school choice in their school choice narratives.

While school choice work is most commonly “motherwork” (Cooper, 2007) and this study applies a Black feminist analytical lens for this reason, 5 of the 22 individuals who voluntarily participated in this study were men, and 3 of the 5 were actively involved in the school choice work. In addition to gender diversity, this sample is also diverse in respect to family structure (11 single mothers, 1 single father, and 6 families headed by married or partnered parents), social class position (9 middle-class and 11 low-income families), and ethnicity (3
mothers were first-generation immigrants from Africa and Haiti and others referenced their West Indian upbringing). Because geography is such an important factor in school choice preferences and choices, detailed information about the 20 parents comprising this sample is also categorized by neighborhood in the tables that follow. All names are pseudonyms and schools are listed by type, not name, in order to protect the identities of parents and schools.
Table 8. Bedford Stuyvesant parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Culture</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Elementary school types chosen (from most recent to least)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Amber | Low    | Single         | African American                 | 2             | 10\textsuperscript{th} 4\textsuperscript{th} | Neighborhood zoned public  
|       |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Magnet  
|       |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Charter |
| Cynthia | Low    | Single         | African American                 | 2             | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Private, special needs voucher  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Neighborhood zoned public  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Variance public  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Charter |
| Daphne | Middle | Married        | African American                 | 2             | 6\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Private independent |
| Deborah | Low    | Single         | African American                 | 2             | 5\textsuperscript{th}  3\textsuperscript{rd} | Neighborhood zoned public |
| Robert | Middle | Married        | African American & West Indian   | 4             | 9\textsuperscript{th}  8\textsuperscript{th}  6\textsuperscript{th}  3\textsuperscript{rd} | Private Independent Montessori |
| Mariam |        |                | African immigrant               |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Private Independent Montessori  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Gifted & Talented program outside of zone |
| Jasmine | Middle | Single         | African American                 | 2             | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Private Independent Montessori  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 6\textsuperscript{th}  Pre-K       | Gifted & Talented program outside of zone |
| John   | Low    | Partner        | African American                 | 5             | 7\textsuperscript{th}  5\textsuperscript{th}  2\textsuperscript{nd}/2\textsuperscript{nd}  K | Zoned public  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 7\textsuperscript{th}  5\textsuperscript{th}  2\textsuperscript{nd}/2\textsuperscript{nd}  K | Out of zone public  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 7\textsuperscript{th}  5\textsuperscript{th}  2\textsuperscript{nd}/2\textsuperscript{nd}  K | Charter |
| Margaret | Middle | Married        | African American                 | 2             | 7\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Out of zone public  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 7\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Private Free School  
|        |        |                |                                   |               | 7\textsuperscript{th}  K       | Charter |
| Michael | Middle | Married        | African American                 | 3             | K  Pre-K       | Charter |
| Richard | Low    | Single         | African American                 | 9             | 5\textsuperscript{th} | Neighborhood zoned public |

Note: Data from interviews
Following the logic of purposeful sampling, 10 parents (a married couple participated in the interview together and have been counted as 1 family instead of 2 parents) living in the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy) constitute 50% of the sample because charter schools are disproportionately located there. Further, parents living in Bed Stuy represent a broad range of class positions. To represent the diversity of capital in Bed Stuy, this group is composed of 5 parents who are identified as middle-class while the other 6 are identified as low-income. Social class plays a particularly important role in Bed Stuy narratives as 4 parents were married and 2 were homeowners who were able to afford elite independent school tuition for all children throughout elementary school. Furthermore, one middle-class family chose to move to Bed Stuy and self-identified as a Black “gentrifier,” representing a trend that Mary Pattillo (2005) refers to as “an exclusive Black cultural renaissance” in specific mixed-income Black urban neighborhoods (p., 322). Finally, Bed-Stuy is often referred to as a historically African American neighborhood, but it is also historically home to African immigrants and a significant number West Indians (Kasinitz, 1992). Black American cultural diversity factored in parents’ school choice narratives across neighborhoods as they referenced their immigrant culture or ancestry when discussing their preferences and choices.
The three parents living in similarly mixed-income neighborhoods of Prospect Heights and Crown Heights were also diverse in class and unique in that all were raising children with partners. Nailah had 8 children, 6 of whom were in middle and high school. Only the 2 children in elementary school at the time of the interview are included in this table. She was also a homeowner and a self-identified entrepreneur who had just launched a private school from her home that her two elementary-aged children and one other child attended.

**Table 9. Prospect Heights and Crown Heights parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Elementary school types chosen (from most recent to least)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10th 4th</td>
<td>Charter, Public in New Jersey, Unzoned public, Private parochial, Private independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nailah</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3rd K</td>
<td>Private school in home, Magnet, Neighborhood zoned public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Out of zone public</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Data from interviews

Just across the CSD border from Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights, the neighborhood of Brownsville has the largest concentration of public housing in the country (18 developments housing 25% of the neighborhood population) with correspondingly high rates of concentrated poverty, disconnected youth, and family homelessness (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2013; Rodriguez, 2012). The school choice stories collected in Brownsville and the even more remote Black neighborhoods of East Flatbush, East New
York, and Starret City further capture the experiences of Black parents who feel trapped in their neighborhoods without quality public school options or the economic means to afford private schools. They also differ from other parents in the sample in that they are all single parents.

Table 10. Brownsville, Canarsie, East Flatbush, New Lots, Starret City parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Elementary school types chosen (from most recent to least)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delphine</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African Immigrant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebenita</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5th 1st K</td>
<td>Charter, Neighborhood zoned public, Zoned Gifted &amp; Talented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michellene</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Haitian Immigrant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Charter, Neighborhood zoned public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Private parochial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>District zoned public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Out of zone public, Charter, Private parochial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from interviews

**Mapping the Architecture of the Charter School Debate**

Preliminary Observations and Field Notes
Interpretive policy analysts “map the architecture” of a policy dilemma to gain an understanding of the means by which stakeholder groups came to their understanding before developing my research questions or developing data collection tools (Yanow, 2000). This involved speaking about school choice and charter proliferation with friends, co-workers, and adult students who were parents and/or elementary school teachers; regularly attending district-level Community Education Council and borough-wide Panel for Education Policy meetings; observing charter school rallies and marches; and attending a fee-based session lead by a high-demand Brooklyn-based school choice consultant. In addition to note taking, meetings were recorded and photos were taken at rallies and marches.

*Preliminary Document Analysis*

The process of “mapping the architecture” also involved extensive and ongoing analysis of local and national media coverage of school choice policy and the related debates over conflicting and contradictory social values and unintended meanings and outcomes of school choice policies outlined in the previous chapters. The documents analyzed in preparation for this study included policies, research, newspaper articles, popular films like *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*, charter school marketing materials, flyers distributed at public meetings and charter school rallies by advocates and opponents, and the Facebook feed of a local school choice advocacy group called “Families for Excellent Schools.” This document analysis revealed what Yanow (2000) refers to as “frame conflict” wherein different stakeholders have focused “cognitively and rationally” on different aspects of school choice policy and value different elements of school choice policy differently (p.11). This frame conflict was outlined in the Chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation.
One of the goals of this study is to identify the extent to which Black parents internalize, subvert, and/or reject dominant narratives about schools and school choice in their school choice narratives. The dominant narratives that emerged from document analysis served as the analytic frame for this study’s research questions, interview protocol, literature review, and data analysis.

• Parents, not government, should have the power to choose children’s schools
• Engaging in school choice is good parenting
• School choice liberates historically oppressed groups to vote with their feet
• Public schools are in an urgent state of crisis that should be addressed through market-based reforms
• A lack of standards and accountability are causes of the public school crisis
• Ineffective and unyielding bureaucracy and teacher unions created the public school crisis
• The cause of the racial achievement gap is culturally deficient families
• Public school reform will be driven by choice, school-level innovation, and market-based competition between schools
• School choice is a civil right and a means to racial educational equity
• Public schools use poverty and segregation as excuses for persistent academic underperformance; they should stop making excuses and replicate strategies used by charters with high-achieving low-income students of color
• Schools of choice are more accountable and responsive than traditional public schools because they have to attract and retain customers
• Better schools have better test scores

These initial observations and analysis of local and national news about school choice revealed a policy environment laden with complex and sometimes contradictory dominant narratives. This study was then designed to understand how Black parents interpret debates about school choice and charter school policies’ conflicting values of liberty and equity or individualism and collectivism and how they experienced elementary school choice in this fraught political context. After mapping the architecture of the school choice debate, a study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods perceive and experience elementary school choice policy given the context of rapid charter school proliferation in their neighborhoods?

2. How has the introduction of more public school choices in their neighborhoods through charters shaped their elementary school preferences, choices, and experiences and how have parents perceived and experienced the opportunity to make more school choice decisions in an increasingly complex school choice marketplace?

3. How, if at all, do the variables of race, class, and geography influence parents’ school choice preferences, decisions, and behaviors within the context of a complex, rapidly changing, and highly segregated school system?

4. School choice has been framed as a mechanism of liberty and racial educational equity by policymakers and school choice advocates, but how do these intents and
assumptions correspond with the perceptions and experiences of Black parents who have engaged in elementary school choice?

Data Collection

After identifying dominant school choice and charter school policy narratives, research questions were developed and a semi-structured in-depth interview protocol was created using broad, open-ended, “story worthy” questions meant to provide participants with opportunities to develop narratives about critical incidences (Chase, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Although parents were only interviewed once for this study, a three-part phenomenological interview protocol was designed following Seidman’s (2013) “three-interview series” structure in order to prompt parents to reconstruct their personal history with schools as parents and as children; provide detailed retrospective stories about their school choice preferences, choices, and relationships with schools; and reflect on the meaning of school choice policies in light of their experiences (see Appendix B). This interview protocol was vetted during coursework, piloted with one participant, and iteratively revised between interviews based on feedback from participants and analysis of the quality of data it elicited.

Interviews were the sole source of data for this study. During the 2012-2013 school year I met with a total of 22 individuals or 20 families (two interviews were conducted with couples) for one interview that lasted between 1 to 3 hours at a location of their choice. All participants were financially compensated for participation with a $20 Target gift card. Directly after each interview I wrote a reflexive memo to capture my initial reactions about the space and research relationship and to make note of important or surprising themes that emerged during the meeting. Each interview was recorded and then fully transcribed by a
professional. All participants were contacted after the transcription was edited and offered the option of reviewing and discussing their transcript (which only 4 of 20 expressed interest in).

Few other studies have used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the school choice experiences of Black parents making school decisions (Pattillo, 2015; Bell, 2009, Cooper, 2009; Pedroni, 2007). These studies will be further engaged in the analyses that follow.

**Data Analysis**

The first stage of data analysis involved listening to the entirety of each interview while reading and editing the professionally transcribed text to ensure that it was readable and fully aligned to what was said. In order to recognize the socially constructed nature of each interview and the interpretive function of transcription, all interactional contexts and the dialogue between the participant and the interviewer were retained in the transcription (Riessman, 2008). There are several reasons for doing this. For one, part of the analytical process involves locating the interviewer/researcher in the interview process and interpretive context. This allows readers to take into account the fact that participants will have developed narratives specifically for this specific audience - a White, middle-class graduate student - as well as to promote methodological mindfulness regarding how the questions were asked and why they were asked in the first place. Further, potential asymmetries of power and privilege in each research relationship requires researchers to be mindful and reflexive about what unsolicited topics participants choose to bring up, which topics they avoided, and which topics the researcher avoided (Luttrell, 2010). Finally, an
interactional transcript allowed for a better interpretation of how each participant wanted to be known by the interviewer/researcher and the imagined future audience for this study.

After replacing names of people with pseudonyms and removing names of schools, profiles of each participant were constructed from post-interview memos and a full reading of the interview transcript. These profiles were written as memos that summarized each parents’ childhood neighborhood and school experiences, school choices for each child, and prevalent themes. Three additional memos were then written for each participant. These included a dialogic interpretation of the narrator’s presumed audience, period of life that each chose to share school choice stories, and purpose of telling school choice stories; a temporal outline of stated school preference sets and actual choices; and dominant themes that emerged in and across each transcript.

The third analytical task involved reducing the full interview text by bracketing out important and compelling narratives relevant to the study’s research questions. Relatively new to the field of policy analysis, narrative analysis is a mode of qualitative research that primarily uses interview data in order to emphasize the retrospective meaning making of narrators (Chase, 2005; Yanow, 2000). Recognizing and revealing the limitedness and constructed nature of every point of view, this analysis privileges the underrepresented and under examined standpoints of Black parents whose narratives may be similar in regards to the influence of factors such as race, class, and role in the family but diverse in regards to their country of origin, social class, gender, experiences with school choice and interactions with different types of schools. A distinguishing feature of narrative inquiry is that it transforms the research relationship from that of interviewer and interviewee to that of
narrator and listener (Chase, 2005). This distinction requires researchers to relinquish a perception of participants as interviewees with answers for that of participants as narrators with stories. This reconceptualization of the research relationship is based on the belief that the stories people tell, not the stories researchers want them to tell, constitute the empirical material they need to better understand how parents make meaning of school choice and charter schools (ibid).

Unlike other forms of narrative analysis that focus on narrative structure, performance, or how stories are told, narrative policy analysis focuses on “issue-oriented stories told by policy actors” and uses analysis to clarify policy positions or mediate amongst differences (Yanow, 2000, p. 58). Following Yanow (2002), the desired change or transformation embodies the narrator’s values, beliefs, and/or feelings about the policy or issue. The process of narrative policy analysis involves selecting school choice narratives that were relevant to the research questions, followed by identification of narrative elements including protagonists, antagonists, conflicts or tensions and resolutions, or “anticipated or desired transformations” (ibid, p. 59). Stories of interpersonal or intrapersonal conflicts, un/fulfilled hopes, frustrations and resolutions, and the variables of race, class, and place also guided the selection process (Seidman, 2013). On-going narrative policy analysis also examined the extent to which parents’ narratives drew upon, resisted, and/or transformed dominant discourses related to school choice and charter school policy.

After labeling important and compelling stories within each full interactional transcript, excerpts were then organized into categories that arose from multiple readings, such as parents stated preferences for “private” or “diverse” schools, and then connections were
made between and within the categories in order to generate themes. Full interactional transcripts were broken into issue-oriented school choice stories selected in order to clarify parents’ positions on school choice and charter school policies. Stories were excerpted from transcripts based on their relevance to the research questions and adherence to conventions of a story including: internal consistency; logical flow; protagonists and antagonists; plot conflict, tensions, and resolution; and persuasive elements (Yanow, 2000). The school choice policy stores selected ranged in length from “brief, bounded segments” to “extended accounts,” with the length of the narrative selected for analysis dependent on the story told (Riessman, 2008). Further analytic memos were then written for select school choice stories that echoed refuted, or reshaped dominant narratives and these memos were used to determine the organization and content of each analytic chapter that follows.

**Validity and Limitations**

The validity of interpretive narrative inquiry is determined by the “trustworthiness” of the narrators’ stories and of the researchers’ analytical story developed from them (Riessman, 2008). Verifying whether participants were telling the truth was not the goal of this situated and interpretivist study; instead, the trustworthiness of parents’ stories was strengthened through strategic analytical attention to how and when individuals’ accounts thematically converged and diverged (ibid, p. 191). The trustworthiness of the interpretations made in the chapters that follow are supported by the choices to record each interview, work with full interactional transcripts, share transcripts with participants, write reflexive memos after each interview and stage of analysis, document processes of data collection and
interpretation in this chapter, and efforts to make this study pragmatically useful to members of the scholarly community and a politically useful tool for promoting equity (ibid). Researcher bias is a common validity threat that refers to the selection of existing data that either fits the researchers’ existing theory or preconceptions or the selection of data that stands out (Maxwell, 2005, p. 108). Expected in all qualitative studies, researcher subjectivity threatens validity when ignored or insufficiently addressed during the process of design and analysis. Addressing it requires researchers to explicitly and continually identify and reflect upon possible biases and plan for how to address them in order to avoid negative consequences (ibid). Efforts were made to make the analysis more transparent for the reader through use of full, primary texts, whenever possible, and “re-presentations” of narrative functions including defined and visible technical devices, specified underlying structure, and data-dependent interpretations (Mishler, 1990, p. 301). Engaging in reflexive qualitative research requires researchers to continually analyze and reflect upon the role that his or her positional subjectivity played in the shaping of this study and relationships with participants. The values, beliefs, feelings, interests and lived experiences that I brought to this project as a researcher shaped the way the problem has been framed, the nature of the research, interview questions asked, and analysis of data.

Further, reactivity is a validity threat that refers to the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied that is uniquely “powerful and inescapable” during interviews (Maxwell, 2005, p.109). Addressing this influence requires understanding how my presence as an interviewer will inevitably influence what is said during interviews and how this will affect the validity of inferences to be drawn from the interview data. I am a white, middle-
class woman who grew up and attended public school in suburban Colorado. I lived in New York for ten years and in Brooklyn for the majority of that time, but I did not attend school in New York City and do not have children in the school system. While I learned to navigate urban schools as a professional, I have not had to navigate nor reckon with the NYC school system as a student or a parent. In addition, my positionality as a graduate student with no children and as a gentrifier in historically Black neighborhoods also shapes my perspective and serves as a limitation of this study. These factors inevitably influenced who chose to participate in the study and what participants chose to share and not share with me.

These characteristics also make me a racial “outsider” researching Black parents’ perceptions and lived racialized experiences and constitute a racialized methodological dilemma that is not without controversy in the field of social science. My work as a White scholar researching Black parents is incongruent with arguments for “racial matching” wherein “insider” researchers are of the same race as participants. This position is based on the epistemological assumption that only “insider” researchers are able to understand the everyday realities of racial “subalterns” or “subordinates” and an ethical concern about Black Americans’ deep and very legitimate distrust of research, especially when conducted by “outsider” researchers (Twine, 2000). Discussing this methodological debate, Emerson (2001) recognizes that social characteristics of researchers “fundamentally affect the kinds of interactions and relations that develop, and hence the character and degree of immersion in the lives of those studied” and identifies the strengths of “insider” research as a greater likelihood of sensitivity of and respect for community sensibilities, likely awareness of
complexity and internal variation or language nuances, and greater ease establishing trust and access (p. 116).

On the other hand, there are also weaknesses related to “insider” research such as the fact that “insiders” may experience issues such as appeals for ethnic loyalty or inability to establish trust or rapport because participants are still acutely aware of asymmetries in educational status and social position, or differing political beliefs (Emerson, 2001; Bridges, 2011). Further, race is not always the dominant or most relevant social signifier, with other attributes such as age, class, and education also shaping the research relationship (Twine, 2000). In this sense, there is the potential for researchers to negotiate a complex set of insider and outsider intersectional characteristics including race, ethnicity, class, education, occupation, gender, and religion. In fact, my relationships with participants differed significantly, with ethnicity/nationality, social class and education serving as significant points of access or barriers to rapport. For instance, middle-class parents with postsecondary education were noticeably more comfortable with the interview experience and our relationship than those without. Further, racial “insider” researchers may feel compelled to comply with assumed cultural norms and participants may assume shared cultural knowledge, thus possibly rendering values, beliefs, and feelings implied instead of explicit; conversely, in researching race and racism, we cannot assume that all racially “subaltern” participants inevitably distrust outsider researchers, have sophisticated critiques of racism, or idealize racially privileged races (ibid).

While racial “insider” researchers have and should continue to research the topic of Black parents and school choice, there are also benefits to “outsider research” that is conducted
using reflexive methodology under “appropriate ethical constraints and on the basis of proper human respect and care” (Bridges, 2001, p. 371). Emerson (2001) highlights the fact that “outsider” research “requires and generates special sensitivity to the dynamics of race and ethnic relations” (p. 118). In this sense, methodologically sound and ethical “outsider” research involves an “expectancy of exposure to correction and criticism” throughout the research process, and this study was designed to provide participants with opportunities to challenge my prejudices at multiple stages of data collection and analysis (ibid, p. 118).

Moreover, the influence of an “outsider” researcher has the potential to “make the familiar strange” for participants, wherein potentially “taken-for-granted experience(s)” require nuance and detail in order to be best understood (Bridges, 2001, p. 374). Participants may, as a result, find this to be a “useful and illuminating experience” in that the outsider/insider dynamic compels them to frame their perceptions and experiences in a way that a “stranger” can understand (ibid, p. 374). While my “outsider” status did create a uniquely complex dynamic for each interview, several parents did make explicit reference to the benefit they gleaned from participating in the interview. For instance, speaking to the benefit gleaned from processing thoughts and experiences aloud to a stranger, one parent referred to the interview experience as a form of “free therapy.” In reflecting on being prompted to think and talk about racial segregation, another parent shared that she had found the practice of sharing her school choice stories with a stranger to be educative and empowering, stating: “I think these kind of conversations are what people need to be scared about because parents get more informed and then we can start to change stuff and start asking more questions.” Similarly, another parent shared the following reflection at the end of his interview:
What’s really got me right now is the complexity of it all. Like I said, I knew that there were some things, but to actually sit down and talk about it, it brings a different awareness to it. It brings a certain awareness to every layer of this ... and there’s so many.

In sum, in order to address the validity threats of researcher bias and reactivity, the following methodological strategies were employed:

• All interviews were conducted in a place of participants’ choice and participants were invited to ask me questions before and after each interview.
• I explicitly stated my commitment to coproduce research that will catalyze improvements for interviewees during the interview (Duneier, 2001; Fine and Weiss, 1996).
• Reflexive memos after each interview that interrogated the research relationship, noting how each participant appeared to react to my whiteness and any instances of dis/comfort. This was especially important for response to the interview question eliciting parents’ perspectives about charter schools’ role in exacerbating racial resegregation.
• Verbatim and reflexive transcription allowed me to rule out misinterpretations and identify my own biases as well as adjust my approach to each subsequent interview.
• During the process of analysis, reflexive memos documented the progressive changes in my interpretation and research focus that allowed me to critically assess my biases and process.
• Triangulation was achieved through interviewing a diverse range of individuals in a diverse range of settings, allowing me to “reduce the risk of chance associations and of
systematic biases...[and] for a better assessment of the generality of the explanations” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112).

• Discrepant evidence or negative cases was searched for in the data.

• Participants’ narratives are central to analysis through the presentation of large selections of direct transcription that publicly represent parents’ perceptions and experiences “honestly, vividly, and accurately” (Bridges, 2001, p. 383).

• Finally, the ultimate aim of this study is to offer liberating or transformative solutions to racial subordination through generating knowledge from people of colors’ “counter-stories” as told from their racialized positionality (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).
A child’s course in life should not be determined by the zip code he’s born in, but by the strength of his work ethic and the scope of his dreams.

- President Barack Obama’s remarks on economic mobility, 2013

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report titled *A Nation At Risk* which argued that the “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” then made the case for an expansive public school reform agenda. While it is debatable that the subsequent and widespread concern with public school failure and crisis is rooted in fact (see Rothstein, 1993), it has nonetheless become a “common sense” (Kumashiro, 2008) dominant narrative undergirding bi-partisan policy and public support for reforms including the privatization of public school governance through charters or vouchers. Parents are key to the success of market-based school choice policies as contemporary school choice policies frame them as empowered to and conversely responsible for selecting from and competing for available seats in quality schools. Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (1993) argue that the dominant narrative of public school crisis and the market-based reforms it has engendered have served to devalue the symbolic conversion value of public schools as cultural goods, and their position is verified by the analysis of parents’ preferences that follow. In addition, they argue that market-based reforms have also generated a related dominant narrative of
engagement in school choice as good parenting, thus subsuming school choice within “general strategies of consumption” of differently valued cultural goods and engendering a “medium of social comparison” between parents (ibid, p. 393).

This dominant narrative of national public school crisis is relatively recent history compared to Black Americans’ long history of identifying issues with public schools located in their residentially segregated neighborhoods and demanding racial educational equity that long predates the activism, organizing, and legal struggles that led to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. Thus, merely framing Black parents’ embrace of school choice as an internalization of contemporary dominant narratives about public school failure and proposed solutions is simplistic and ahistorical. This chapter contributes to a substantial body of school choice research that understands parents’ preferences as social constructs (Holme, 2002; Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, 2012; Roda and Wells, 2013; Lubeinsiki, 2008; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008; Bell, 2008; Saporito, 2003; Weiher and Tedin, 2002) by analyzing Black parents’ stated preferences through a generational and socio-geographical perspective. Parents’ perceptions of schooling, choice, and parenting have been shaped by their experiences as Black children and parents living in racially segregated Black neighborhoods that have been impacted by concentrated urban poverty for multiple generations.

This chapter is dedicated to an multi-generational analysis of Black parents’ internalization of the dominant narratives of public school failure and choice as good parenting and an understanding how these dominant narratives have shaped Black parents’ school choice discourses, preferences, socio-geographic perceptions, and relationships with their own and
other neighborhoods. While parents internalized the dominant narrative of public school failure and expressed strong preferences for private schooling as a result, a nuanced analysis of their school choice preferences reveals that explicitly stated private preferences are less a rejection of public schooling and more a rejection of their neighborhood public schools and the neighbors their public schools serve. Black parents who participated in this study recognized that high-quality public schools and programs like Gifted & Talented exist within a hierarchy of public school choice types; however, more often than not, they also realized that these schools are disproportionately located in predominately affluent and White neighborhoods.

The analysis is unlike other school choice studies that also identify geography as a variable and find that parents’ choices are delimited by their need and preference for conveniently located schools due to transportation costs, inflexible work schedules, and safety concerns (Pattillo, 2015; Teske, 2012; Schneider, et.al, 2000). In contrast, this analysis reveals that the spatial consideration of school proximity was rarely a factor because parents perceived their neighborhoods and neighborhood public schools as devalued cultural goods and perceived schools of choice and/or schools located in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods as culturally valued goods. Their perceptions had a generational component, in that fifteen of the twenty parents who participated in this study were raising children in the same or similar Black neighborhoods where they were raised. Thus they shared the dilemma of passing these neighborhoods and the related effects of concentrated urban poverty on to their children by raising them there (Sharkey, 2013) and many found
themselves engaging in a generational tradition of using choice to escape neighborhood public schools.

This chapter begins with an analysis of parents’ schooling biographies, with a focus on how their school choice preferences were shaped by childhood retrospective perceptions of their own experience with various school types, their neighborhoods and neighbors, and their own parents’ labor of school choice. After recognizing the influence of generational experiences of racially segregated neighborhood schools and a Black tradition of engaging in school choice to avoid them, the analysis will shift to parents’ internalization of the dominant narrative of public school crisis with valuation of private schooling over public schools. A core theme in parents’ rationalization of the value of private over public is their internalization of the dominant narrative that parents who engage in choice are better parents, thus parents of children in neighborhood public schools are a social network to be avoided. While parents expressed strong preferences for private schooling, they also identified many quality public school types in their choice sets, or groupings of preferences or banks of reasonable options that they considered (Bell, 2008; 2009). Importantly, these public schools were largely schools of choice and were located in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. Black parents who participated in this study largely interpreted school choice policy as a means of accessing seats in culturally valued public schools and of escaping their culturally devalued neighborhoods and neighborhood public schools and the families they serve. This is contrary to the logic undergirding the disproportionate concentration of charters in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black neighborhoods of color in order to expand choices within Black
neighborhoods, and suggests that Black parents perceive choice as an unintended means to access racially and class integrated schools.

**Parents’ School Choice Habitus**

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is understood to be a set of internalized and durable dispositions shaped by the family in childhood and dominant discourses throughout life that in turn shape people’s attitudes, behaviors, values, and responses to circumstances. Parents’ school biographies reveal the ways in which their attitudes, values, and preferences related to school choice were shaped by their experiences as Black students during the post-civil rights and post-colonial era, with attention to how it shaped their attitudes and values about private and public schooling and the labor of school choice. The neighborhood and school environments they experienced as children and their perceptions of the school choice labor their parents engaged in directly influenced what type of schooling they considered for their children. It also influenced how they understood their responsibility as Black parents raising elementary aged children in racially segregated Black neighborhoods with proximity to concentrated urban poverty and disproportionate concentrations of underperforming public schools.

Several parents directly indicated the powerful influence of childhood experiences on their school choice attitudes, beliefs, and ultimate preferences. Deborah referred to knowing the difference between a good and bad school based on her “own educational background, when I was coming up” and Cynthia described her school choice experience as “leaning towards the familiar, because it’s what I know.” Delphine - the daughter of African ambassadors who had positive school experiences in private schools abroad - spoke of the tendency for parents to
“want to find again, what they had when they were young, when they were going to school.”
Daphne spoke of “know[ing] what a good school looks like, and how it operates” based on her positive experience in her neighborhood public school; yet, she also recognized that other people who attended neighborhood schools “might bring their not-so-nice experiences” to the school choice process, thinking: “Oh, anything but that [neighborhood public school]” and using a rationale of “opting for the devil they don’t know” when seeking alternatives to the neighborhood public school.

Parents’ preferences are not constructed in an ahistorical vacuum; their experiences with schools as Black children in the post-civil rights and post-colonial era and their perceptions of their neighborhoods and parents’ school choice work significantly shaped their preferences for their own children. The following analysis of parents’ childhood schooling narratives reveals the ways that parents’ racialized schooling experiences and perception of their own parents’ school choice labor influences their current preferences and perceptions of school choice polices.

Growing Up in NYC

Explaining why the overall economic advancement of Black Americans has been “remarkably limited” since the civil rights era, Patrick Sharkey (2013) argues that that racial inequality is “something that occurs over long periods of time and structures the opportunities available to families over multiple generations,” adding that places or social settings are “crucial sites for the transmission of racial inequality in the post civil rights era” because essential aspects of social life, like schools, are organized by geography or space (p. 10, 2-5, 14). Describing the American urban ghetto of the 1980s as a “place where the most impoverished African
Americans had been abandoned,” Sharkey (2013) argues that the effects of urban poverty on Black Americans of all classes living within or in proximity to the urban ghetto persist into the twenty-first century and have been compounded over generations because “parents pass on the place itself to their children” (p. 26, 21). Fifteen of the twenty parents in this sample were born and raised in racially segregated Black NYC neighborhoods during the 1970s and 1980s and faced the dilemma of passing these neighborhoods and the related effects of urban poverty on to their children by also raising them there.

Referring to the effects of concentrated urban poverty on their childhood experiences, parents who shared the childhood experience of growing up in Black NYC neighborhoods spoke of racial segregation, the paucity of quality neighborhood schools, and the “rough” nature of their neighborhoods. In the most extreme case, Beverly’s stories about growing up in Brownsville - a highly segregated Black neighborhood with the largest concentration of public housing in the country where she was raising her daughter and niece - were set during a period that she referred to as “almost two and a half decades of destruction” that she blamed on redlining policies and crack and heroin epidemics. She described the Brownsville of her childhood as “horrible” with “dilapidated buildings, crack houses” where she played “hop scotch with crack rocks…the blue tops, red tops, yellow tops” and posited that many of the other parents raising children in her neighborhood and sending their children to neighborhood schools were crack babies born during this period.

Beyond the adverse neighborhood effects of concentrated urban poverty, parents who were raised in NYC also grew up during a period when school choice was largely limited to the neighborhood public school or private religious schools. While the school choice landscape
their parents chose from was far less complex, their neighborhoods had similar concentrations of racially segregated, under-resourced, poorly performing, and unsafe neighborhood schools, and parents who participated in this study referred to sending one’s child to parochial school as an alternative to neighborhood public schools as a cultural norm. As Robert explained: “Even in the early 50’s in Bed Stuy, if you could afford it, at the time there weren’t any independent schools, but you’d send your kid to parochial school.” Importantly, the school choice landscape has changed dramatically over the course of one generation, with parents now choosing from a growing variety of public options while parochial schools are in significant decline. Illustrating the shifting landscape of school choice, the two Catholic schools another parent attended as a child in Bed Stuy had recently been converted into condos and a charter school.

Parochial Narratives

Seven of twenty parents in the sample attended NYC parochial schools during elementary and middle school. While several were raised Catholic, all remembered their parents or guardians choosing parochial school as a means of avoiding their neighborhood public schools. Sandra explained that Catholic school choice was “an option against public school” for most of the parents that she knew, not a religious choice. Similarly, Amina was not raised Catholic and explained that her mother chose Catholic schools “by default” because she had a negative experience with her older sister’s public school. As mentioned earlier, Robert, who grew up in Bed Stuy, described parochial school choice as a neighborhood and familial tradition, explaining that his mother and uncle also attended Catholic school before him.
Reflecting on their parents’ school choice labor, these parents referred to the financial sacrifices that their families made in order to avoid neighborhood public schools. Amina remembered her grandmother helping with tuition and “the family business” of selling chocolates to supplement tuition. Jasmine explained that her mother was a single parent who “bent over backwards and gave us, you know, canned food, and Swanson dinners to pay my tuition.” She also shared that she only understood why her mother made such substantial financial sacrifices after playing at the neighborhood park and realizing that she was “afraid of the regular kids” because they were “more aggressive.” Sandra also remembered asking her parents why they made the economic sacrifice when public schools were free and her parents explaining that they were concerned about her safety and teacher quality. These parents perceived their parents’ school choice labor and familial and financial sacrifices as an essential means of avoiding neighborhood public schools and the neighbors they served. These perceptions influenced the way that they rationalized the labor and financial sacrifices they made for their own children.

Two parents attended both parochial and public schools and framed their parents’ school choice labor differently as a result. Amber first attended a Catholic school in New Jersey and jokingly described her childhood self as “a little bougie.” Her family then moved to Brooklyn where she attended her neighborhood public school that she remembered as being “total chaos” because the kids were out of control and didn’t wear uniforms. She credited her mother for initially “putting effort into” her education by enrolling her in Catholic school, rationalizing “first of all, you’re paying for that [laughs] and you have to make sure so, she looked into that.” She also complained that her mother “didn't put no effort” into sending her
the neighborhood zoned school after moving to Brooklyn and explained that while she forgave her mother, she had made an intentional effort to be different, stating: “I did some work trying to find a good school.” Like other parents who also attended parochial school, Amber postulated that parents are compelled to be more involved in their children’s education when they are paying customers. Further, her negative public school experiences caused her to dialectically frame enrollment in the neighborhood public schools as a lack of parental effort.

Continuing the theme of financial investment in schooling as good parenting, Robert fondly referred to his grandfather who raised him as someone who worked as “a chef all his life” and “never owned a car” because he had invested the “little money he had” in his mother and uncle’s parochial educations. In exchange for taking on the responsibility and costs of raising Robert, his grandparents expected his mother to be involved in his rearing through paying his parochial school tuition. Robert remembered being pulled out of parochial school when his mother could no longer afford to pay tuition and being sent to the “rough” neighborhood school where he remembered feeling less afraid of teachers than other students. He also told a story about a favorite public school teacher who gave him extra schoolwork, which benefited him academically, but hurt him socially, because “in public school that’s really rough.” When it came time to transition to middle and high school, he told stories of his mother making up for her inability to pay private school tuition by setting him up for G&T testing and using her social connections to get him into a high school outside of his zone. Like other parents who attended parochial schools, Robert also equated good parenting with financial sacrifice and labor, and he dichotomized parochial schools with “rough” public
schools. Like Amina, his parochial and public experiences taught him that parents if parents cannot afford to pay private school tuition, they should still invest in their children’s educations though engaging in the labor of public school choice.

As following analysis will demonstrate, parents often extended and associated the conceptualization of good parenting from that of financial sacrifice through investment in parochial school tuition to that of the extra labor of engaging in public school choice in their contemporary context. Conversely, they conceptualized the “regular” neighborhood children who attended neighborhood public schools as “rough” or “aggressive” and parents who send their children to neighborhood public schools as idle or negligent, thus social networks to be avoided.

Parents who attended parochial school made vague references to the quality of the education they received. In the sole reference to academic quality, Beverly explained that she learned critical thinking and stated:

> the best thing my parents ever did was put me through that Catholic elementary. If I didn’t go to Catholic, I don’t think I would know anything. I wouldn’t even know how to read probably.

Other parents referred to the structure of parochial schooling. Amina described her parochial school experience as “enjoyable, equitable” because there was no academic tracking, which she associated with public schools. Sandra described her parochial school as “great” and “nurturing” because the unique K-8 structure of her school allowed her to make “lifelong friends.” Robert remembered his parochial schools as “small schools” with strong
parent-school relationships to the extent that parents gave teachers permission to discipline their children using corporeal punishment.

Parents fondly referred to their parochial schools as “diverse” environments, a term that served as proxy for proximity to Whiteness or for social environments that were relatively integrated compared to the racially segregated all-Black schools in their neighborhoods. Beverly told the story of a young woman of color she had met in college who attended a racially segregated school and was consequentially intimidated by White people as a result. She then juxtaposed this story with her “diversified” Catholic school experience where she “grew up with different nations” and “had friends of every color,” explaining: “I knew I wasn’t afraid of them [White people], because I grew up with them, so what am I scared of?” She explained that this shaped her preference for diverse schools because she did not want her children to attend racially segregated schools where they might develop a similar fear of White people or what she categorized as “like a reverse type of racism, but…submissive racism.” In addition, she also told a story about her brother being kicked out of Catholic school after 5th grade for behavior issues and having to attend an all Black public school with “no diversity” where staff attempted to unfairly diagnose him with ADD. In comparing her “diversified” Catholic school experience with her brother’s racially segregated public school experience, she seems to suggest that attending parochial school protected her from racialized public school experiences such as the overrepresentation of students of color in the most subjective special education categories (Ferri and Connor, 2005).

Amina also described her Catholic school as “diverse,” explaining that she was “one of, probably, three African-Americans” in her class and Cynthia described her Catholic schools
as a place where she saw “a lot of White people.” Amber shared a story about her disappointment and surprise when another Black student in her son’s public school derisively called her light-skinned son White, explaining that her childhood experience of attending a diverse Catholic school where she had had a close White friend protected her from having to talk about “color” and racism at such an early age. Notably, Sandra had a similar experience in parochial school but a different conceptualization of diversity, describing her parochial school as “not diverse” because she remembered being one of only twenty African Americans in a school of over a thousand students. However, she did posit that being the racial minority in the school benefitted her in that she learned lessons about “how other people are living, how other people are going to react to you, what you’re going to take personal and what you’re not going to take personal.”

All parents who attended NYC parochial schools also attended public high schools where they used their overwhelmingly positive parochial experiences as a foil and benchmark. Beverly stated that she “learned nothing” in public high school because there was no discipline. Cynthia remembered public high school as an environment where she and her sibling were socially “behind everybody else” because they had been “more sheltered” in parochial school. She also remembered first encountering racism in public high school when she refused to pledge allegiance to the flag and her White Russian teacher saying: “if you don’t like America than you can just go back to Africa.” Amina remembered encountering her first African American teacher and feeling uncomfortable because she was used to her Italian friends from Catholic school, not kids with “experiences from the Bronx or Manhattan and stuff.” Robert described his public high school as “a little rough” and was critical of academic
tracking, which he described as “the legacy of bussing,” explaining that Caribbeans with “superior primary school education to the locals” were segregated from academic opportunities in lower academic tracks because of their race and that he also did not see most of the Black friends he traveled with from Bed Stuy once inside the school because he was assigned to a higher academic track that was predominately White.

In sum, parents who attended parochial schools as children conceptualized their parents’ decision to enroll them in a private school as a common “option against public school” and they largely framed their parents’ school choice labor as good parenting thorough necessary financial sacrifice. They remembered parochial schools as fair and nurturing environments where they encountered what most described as diverse student bodies, but what was interpreted to be proximity to Whiteness or relatively racially integrated school environments. Using their parochial experiences as a foil, they conceptualized “regular” children in neighborhood public schools as “rough” and public schools as less diverse, unsafe, chaotic, and as hiring poorly qualified teachers. Their habitus - with its concordant values, attitudes, and beliefs about schooling and choice - shaped their responses to the circumstances of generationally entrenched residential and school segregation and what they perceived as a paucity of quality public schools in their neighborhoods. This habitus shaped their preferences in a school choice landscape that was dramatically different from their childhoods, with significant changes between 2000 and 2010 due to the rapid decline of parochial schools and the related proliferation of charter schools in their neighborhoods.

Public School Narratives
In striking contrast, the six parents who attended only NYC public schools as children did not share extensive stories about their parents’ school choice process nor their own experiences in school as related to their school choice preferences. Notably, the three parents who spoke of positive public school experiences were enrolled in G&T programs or higher academic tracks, with one offering the caveat that her brother was in the regular academic track and had a negative experience that had left him disenchanted with public schools. Like parents who attended parochial schools, they also distinguished between their elementary/middle and high school experiences. However, unlike those with parochial backgrounds who had negative experiences in public high school, one parent stated that her experience in a specialized public high school was so positive that she would like her children who attended an elite private school to have the same experience. Only one of these parents shared a negative perspective of her public school experience, describing it as mediocre and inadequate preparation for college.

Parents who attended public schools also perceived their parents’ school choice labor differently. Patricia was explicitly dissatisfied with her neighborhood public school experience, stating: “My mom just put me in a school that was closest to our house...My experience that I took from that is that I don’t want my daughter to repeat the same thing that I had to go through, going to my zone school.” She explained that instead of “just” sending her daughter to the school closest to her home as her mother had done with her, she had made a “conscious decision that I was going to research to see what was the best school.” On the other hand, Daphne had a positive experience in advanced public school academic tracks and framed her mother's decision to send her to the zoned school as an act of
“necessity” not laziness. Empathizing with both her parents and current low-income neighbors, she explained that both her mother and father were involved in PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences and the neighborhood public school “had to work” because it was the “only way to keep the job, maintain a household, still be home in time to check homework, cook dinner and have a family life.” In contrast, Yvonne, attributed her own sense of parental empowerment to her mother’s example, remembering her involvement in schools and school choice through serving on the PTA at her neighborhood elementary in Brownsville, lying about her place of residence to access a G&T middle school program outside of the neighborhood, and using social connections to access a better public high school than the one she was originally assigned to.

Like parents who attended NYC parochial schools, parents who attended public schools also characterized the neighborhood children who attended public schools as “rough.” Contrasting her public school experience to those of her children who attend an elite private school in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood, Daphne described the neighborhood public school where she had a positive experience in advanced academic tracks as “insular” because “everyone came from three blocks away” and as a “really rough” environment where “language was rough” and “fighting was part of the culture.” In contrast to Daphne’s efforts to distinguish herself from her “rough” neighbors, Richard reasoned that his mother had engaged in the school choice labor of sending his sister to a public school of choice outside of Bed Stuy because she had a good temperament, while she sent him to the neighborhood school because he was “rough.” Notably, he used this same logic to explain why charters, which he described as a public school where students “supposedly...get a
better education,” were not an option for his daughter because she shared his “rough” temperament.

The experience of parents who attended public schools outside of NYC was strikingly different. Margaret, who was very frustrated with the NYC public school system, grew up in Maryland suburbs and explained that her parents were educators and scientists who had grown up in the Jim Crow South, thus “always sought schools that were multicultural, and just very open intellectually” as a result. She described the suburban Maryland public schools her parents chose as progressive and multicultural institutions that “very much encouraged inquiry, exploration, play, the ability to make mistakes, a sense that this is a journey, not a destination.” Contrasting her childhood experience with that of her children’s in NYC, she explained that the county she grew up does not have a “Black-White achievement gap” and described her school experience as “learning for the sake of learning, more play-based” where students “went much deeper, much more depth.” She asserted that her school experiences shaped her preference for a diverse student body and progressive curriculum and structure, not necessarily a certain type of school, and that she is happy with the out-of-zone public school she enrolled her child in precisely because it is similar to her suburban public school experience.

Michael had “a very overwhelmingly positive public school experience” in South Carolina where “you go to school where you live, period.” He frequently used his own school experience as a foil to the poor quality of the neighborhood zoned school and the NYC elementary school choice process that requires the extra labor of “having to enter lotteries, [and] sign[ing] up early.” He frequently referred to his unfamiliarity with NYC school choice
because of his outsider experience and expressed frustration, stating: “Who knew? I had no idea the education process was going to be like this.” His childhood experiences led him to assume that public schools outside of NYC are better and to consider residential choice as an option, explaining: “one of our plans has always been to probably relocate back down South simply because of school situations.”

John attended middle and high school in North Carolina. Explaining that his two children in public school will be moving to Georgia with their mother at the end of the school year, he referenced this experience in stating: “schools outside of New York is much better...everything down to the lunch...especially down in the South, they take education and stuff more serious...[by] being on your back about things,” and because they offer sports and afterschool programs. In sharing stories about North Carolina and his children moving to Georgia, John expressed the belief that the best public school choice is a residential choice to leave NYC. Sharing his concern about helping his son with the middle school application, he confessed: “I don’t know nothing about none of these schools. Growing up, we went to the local school, closest to you, especially for elementary and middle school.” Like Michael, he recognized that his experiences attending zoned neighborhood schools did not prepare him to effectively engage in NYC school choice for his children, even though Brooklyn is his hometown.

In sum, parents who attended public schools inside NYC had mixed experiences and perceptions of their parents’ school choice labor. However, they shared a perception of neighborhood public school students as “rough” with one parent rationalizing that “rough” students belong in neighborhood public schools while those with better temperaments
should benefit from parents’ investment in school choice work. Parents who attended public schools outside of NYC had positive public school experiences and appeared to share the haunting belief that public schools outside of NYC are better, with residential choice a factor in each of their school preferences.

Immigrant Narratives

Finally, three parents were raised abroad with school experiences that differed dramatically and significantly based on class. Michellene immigrated to Brooklyn from Haiti and the only story she told about her schooling experience was that public school attendance in Haiti was determined by whether one’s family should afford the tuition and whether one’s home was located close enough to walk to school on time. Michellene felt lucky to have attended school and explained that her parents had no other school choices, thus this was the model of school choice labor she had to reject or emulate. As a result, her choice set included neighborhood public schools and charters that were near her home, and one other nearby charter. Notably, she was the only parent in the sample who declared that proximity to her home was a strong preference and was the only parent who did not complain about her school choices or experiences as a parent.

In contrast, the other two immigrant parents in this sample shared the experience of attending parochial schools abroad and coming to the U.S. with high expectations for American public schools that were quickly dashed by their experiences raising children and choosing schools in predominantly low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods. Mariam, who was married to Robert, was raised in post-colonial Cameroon, West Africa where she attended parochial schools before immigrating to the US to attend
college. She described her schooling as modeled after the English system of education in that is was “very rigid” and “very strict” with uniforms and “no nonsense” discipline. Providing evidence of her “superb education” and the benefits of the school’s “rigidity,” she explained that she received 16 college credits upon college enrollment because she was so academically advanced compared to her peers, leading her to graduate with college degree in just 2.5 years. She explained that she was “surprised” at being able to graduate American college so quickly and voiced her frustration with American public school systems and zoning policy:

I always complained to him [Robert] that America, a lot of people leave the third world to come here for a great education but unfortunately I was a little disappointed that they don’t focus a lot on educating your children. Education starts from home. When I saw the quality of the education, I knew that everything has to be zoned. It really made me wonder.

Delphine immigrated to Brooklyn from the Ivory Coast. Her parents are international ambassadors and she lived in the Ivory Coast and Belgium where she attended private and parochial schools with private tutors as support. Juxtaposing herself with other parents who made public school choices she disagrees with, she posited that she has different preferences because she comes from a “certain background” with “public politician parents...doctors, lawyers in my family” who have college degrees from esteemed universities, and that she and her daughter must “follow the legacy of that.” From her outsider perspective on American public schools, she explained: “from what I hear, America is one of the worst as far like, public education” and asserted: “there was no way I would put my child in a public school, no, not at all.” Explaining her preference for and choice of an all-girls charter school known
for its strict disciplinary practices, Delphine referenced her own Catholic school experiences and asserted that she “was raised in discipline and that’s what my daughter will have.” She also noted that there are “a lot of foreigners” in charter schools, especially the charter her daughter attends, explaining: “I understand the parents. They have another education, a more stricter education and that’s what they want to give to their children.”

She also shared that she “was not really raised around a lot of Black people” and that her parents explicitly chose to “try to maximize a lot of our open mind...not only staying on one culture” and “not raised with no color” with the result that she and her siblings refer to themselves as “world citizens.” She frequently referred to her international travels and schooling experiences as a child as it related to her desire to raise her child so that she will be comfortable anywhere in the world, not just in the predominately low-income and racially segregated neighborhood of Brownsville where she lives or Bed Stuy where her daughter’s school is located. Acknowledging that the following statement might be controversial, she explained that, due to her influence, her daughter is “more comfortable with not Black color around her” and that she “feels more at ease with, foreign Euro, I mean White people.” Relatedly, she also referred to the ways her international upbringing negatively affected her relations with her Black American neighbors in Brownsville, and imagined her neighbors to be critiquing her disposition and school choice preferences by thinking: “Oh, she thinks she’s White.”

In sum, like parents who grew up outside of NYC, immigrant parents who attended private schools in their countries of origin used their positive school experiences as a foil for NYC public schools and a motivation to seek alternatives to neighborhood public schools. In
contrast, Michellene who felt lucky for having the chance to attend public school in Haiti, did not have a critique of NYC schools or choices and was the only parent in the sample who explicitly expressed a preference for school proximity to her home. Both Mariam and Delphine experienced distinction in attending elite private schools in their respective post-colonial African countries and disappointment with their public school options in their predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods. They both described their schools as having strong disciplinary policies and both seemed to be distinguishing themselves from their Black American neighbors in explaining why they did not include neighborhood public schools in their choice sets. Speaking to the racial politics of school choice, Delphine actually made the case that her neighbors derisively perceive her as White because she prefers parochial, independent, and charter schools and rejects the neighborhood school.

Black parents’ childhood experiences of schooling vary as much as this sample varies in terms of gender, class, culture, and family structure. The common themes that emerges across the majority of their childhood schooling narratives is that of a perception of Black urban neighborhood public schools as institutions to be avoided, largely because they serve “rough” students and a perception of good parenting as that of investing in choice, either through financial sacrifice necessary to afford private tuition or through the labor required by engaging in public school choice. As the following section will demonstrate, parents’ interpretations of their childhood schooling and neighborhood experiences in combination with dominant narratives of public school crisis and school choice as good parenting significantly shaped their elementary school preferences.
Parents’ Choice Sets

As established in Chapter 1, parents living in NYC have a broad range of private and public elementary school choice options to choose from. The analysis that follows identifies the range of school choice types that parents were aware of and considered for their children. School choice research uses the term “choice sets” to describe parents’ groupings of preferences or banks of reasonable options that they considered for their children (Bell, 2008; 2009; Elacqua, 2005). Graph 1 lists and quantifies all of the elementary school choice options parents named when reflecting upon their preferences for each of their children. The following graph describes the aggregate count of instances that each elementary school choice option was mentioned as part of a school choice set by parents who engaged in the school choice process (Richard and John are two single fathers who admitted to not making school choices for their children, so their preference data was not included in this table). Importantly, the following graph consists of the types of public zoned, public choice, and private options parents explicitly mentioned considering for their children, not necessarily what they eventually chose or were able to access.
Table 11. Aggregate count of elementary school choice types considered by parents

![Bar Chart]

Note: Data from interviews

The data represented in this graph merits clarification and qualitative nuance, as the numbers tell a simplistic and incomplete story. For instance, while three parents mentioned considering homeschooling as a school choice option, two of the three only referred to it as an absolute last resort after all other choices had been exhausted. Similarly, while nine parents mentioned their neighborhood zoned school as part of their choice set, there was a range of reasons why they considered them, including: just moving to the city and not knowing the choice landscape, considering them an absolute last resort when other school choices fell through, or considering them a means to help their children connect with other neighborhood kids.
Public preferences

The majority of parents included public school options in their choice sets, especially when these options provided access to highly-coveted seats in schools of choice located outside of their neighborhoods. Parents commonly referred to high-performing zoned schools that were located in relatively affluent and predominately White Brooklyn neighborhoods, such as Park Slope, and listed various means to accessing seats in them including the official routes of city- or district-zoned options or applying for variance, the unofficial route of using social networks to gain access to public schools outside of their zone, and one mentioning the right to transfer students out of a persistently failing school into a better performing school then granted by No Child Left Behind provisions. Further, parents also commonly included public schools with specialized programming in their choice sets, including three parents who mentioned magnet schools and nine parents who had their children tested for Gifted & Talented (G&T) programs. This graph also illustrates the significant impact of charter school proliferation in central Brooklyn neighborhoods during the time that these parents were raising elementary-aged children, with fourteen parents including charters in their choice sets at some point in their elementary school choice process.

Despite the fact that parents expressed a broad and substantial range of public school types in their preference sets, many echoed the dominant narrative of public school failure or crisis when discussing their preferences. Robert – who attended parochial and public schools in Brooklyn and whose four children attended an elite independent school - stated: “the fact of the matter is, particularly in the major cities now, public education has failed.” Asked why charters are so popular with parents, Cynthia - who attended parochial school in Brooklyn
and whose special needs son attended public and private schools - responded: “public schools are so terrible, anything would be better.” Ebenita - who attended a G&T school in Brooklyn and had recently enrolled all three children in a charter - used her perception of public schools crisis to explain her rationale for considering charters:

   Every parent at their core wants to try and give their children the best opportunity. With public schools failing, with mayoral and state and federal funding cuts, teacher lay-offs, school closings; this downward spiral that public education has been on for such a long time, makes you have to try.

Notably several juxtaposed public school crisis and failure with charter schools, even though charters are a type of public school choice. Although they are publicly funded, parents often made this distinction between public and charters, associating them with culturally valued private schooling and perceiving them as alternatives to culturally devalued neighborhood public schools.

*Private preferences*

Regardless of their ability to pay tuition, parents expressed markedly strong preferences for private schooling, with eight parents mentioning private independent schools, four mentioning private school scholarship programs, and eight mentioning parochial schools. At the time of the interview, four parents had children enrolled in private school and another four had at least one child enrolled in private school at some stage of the elementary school years. More importantly, parents who were satisfied with a public school their child/ren attended often discursively likened them to private schools. Moreover, many parents who expressed a strong preference for charter schools described them as being “like private
school level” and as “private city schools.” In making these private school analogies, parents often employed the dominant market-based conceptualization of private school-parent relationships where schools are consumer-responsive institutions and parents are consumers with relatively more control and investment. Further, whether speaking directly of private schools or using a discursive private school analogy for a public school, they also tended to associate private schooling with student diversity and progressive curricula and pedagogy.

Importantly, this count of private preferences also requires nuance as parents’ school choice narratives revealed that public schools were among the first stated preferences for parents with children enrolled in private schools at the time of the interview. Parents whose children had only attended elite private schools explained that they first considered public schools but were dissatisfied with their experiences engaging in public school choice and with the programming that neighborhood public schools offered. For instance, Daphne chose an elite independent school located in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood that is far more “diverse” and “child-focused” and more responsive to families than what she encountered in school visits. Robert and Mariam also sent their children to an elite independent school in “downtown” Brooklyn but had first toured neighborhood public and charter schools, perceiving the act of enrolling their children in neighborhood schools as investing in the well being of their neighborhood. Robert described their perspective at that time as: “Okay, we’re going to send our kids to the local school, we’re going to get involved.’ We were still romantic.”
Parents with children in private school at the time of the interview also chose public schools first but pulled them out due to concerns with special needs services, class size, safety, or not being selected in charter lotteries. For instance, after moving back to Brooklyn from Florida, Jasmine engaged in an extensive struggle to access a seat in a G&T program located in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood for her son, only to pull him out and apply for independent school scholarships after what she perceived as an unsafe encounter with a child from the regular track. Jasmine described her school choice labor as an ongoing effort to protect her academically gifted, “very gentle, very diplomatic and ... very sensitive” son from other public school children. Patricia first applied to an estimated four charter schools because she preferred “free first,” but her child was not selected by any charter lottery so she enrolled her in a parochial school. Describing her shift to a preference for private schools, she shared the following perception of the unique dynamic of the private parent-school relationship:

So I feel like with the parochial schools and everything like that, I feel like you can be a little bit more in depth with it, because you’re paying for it, obviously [laughs]. You want to see what you’re paying for. Even though I don’t have the money to pay for it and she’s on a scholarship, but you actually see what you’re paying for, because now you’re like, ‘This is not for free. I need to know what’s going on.’

In other words, Patricia posited that she is a more engaged and involved parent because the school is tuition-based, echoing a market-based conceptualization of enhanced involvement through parents’ financial investment that was a strong theme across parents’ school choice narratives.
Other parents sent only their oldest children to private school yet stated that the positive experiences with the private schools their first children attended had influenced their public school preferences for subsequent children. These shifts in choice sets and choices with multiple children may reflect how school choice sets are reshaped over time with increased public choices that have had time to develop a record of success, parents’ strengthened school choice knowledge and skills, and/or parents’ depleted resources and/or energy.

Interestingly, unlike parents whose children attended private elementary schools at the time of the interview, many parents with children in public schools during the time of the interview explicitly valued private schooling over public schooling. Specifically, parents who were satisfied with their public or charter school used analogies to associate them with private schools when describing their merits. For instance, while Yvonne’s oldest only attended parochial schools and her first and explicit preference was private school, her financial situation constrained her from including private schools in choice sets for her second and third children. She explained:

I wanted for my kid, based on what my son had, based on what my older son had. So that’s my experience. So he had this amazing experience. And so, I needed for my other children to have just as an amazing experience, in a public school setting, so that I could remain home. Otherwise I would have had to go to work, go back to work.

In other words, Yvonne – who attended NYC public schools and was an educational activist and community organizer by vocation - framed public school preferences as a sound financial decision and a plight to find a public school as “amazing” as the private schools her first child attended. Describing the merits of the out-of zone elementary public school she found for
her youngest after difficult public school experiences and searches, she explained that, among other factors, “it has a private school feel in that everybody is involved and everybody pitches in and the kids call their teachers by their first name” (italics added for emphasis). Like the majority of parents, she equated private schools with enhanced parental involvement and progressive structure, curriculum, and pedagogy. Similarly, describing what she liked about the popular out-of-zone progressive elementary public school that her daughter attended, Margaret explained that it is “like Calhouns [an elite independent preparatory school], the closest, but it’s a public school, so it’s not that, but it came close.”

Other parents used a private school analogy when describing the merits of charters they had chosen. After a protracted and taxing public school choice experience (described in Chapter 6), Ebenita felt that she had finally found a high-quality school for her three children. Describing the merits of the charter they attended at the time of the interview, she stated:

> It’s been a long time coming. It’s a daily fight getting there, Lord knows. It’s worthwhile and the kind of curriculum that they’re getting for free is a godsend, especially in this day and age because they really are like private school level.

She then distinguished the charter as one of the “higher standard” charters in Brooklyn with “basic core standards” that are higher than public schools and high expectations of parents. Similarly, Amber – who attended both parochial and public schools - explained that some charter schools are like private schools because they have smaller class sizes. Michellene – an immigrant from Haiti who was satisfied with the charter her son attended - explained how parent speakers at another charter’s open house described the school as safe and similar to the private schools they had previously sent their children to. Steven had attended the
Harlem Children’s Zone Baby College and preferred charters as a result, describing them as “private city school[s]” that are “better” and “more advanced” than public schools. Notably, he held this perspective regardless of the facts that he is satisfied with the public school his son attends and that his children have never attended a charter.

On the other hand, John – who also expressed his belief that public schools located outside of NYC are better - explicitly stated his preference for private schools over public, explaining his belief that private school students “become more successful” and that private schools are less crowded so children get individual attention. More compellingly, he posited:

If my kids were there (in private school), I probably wouldn’t be having this conversation with you about public school and charter school, because that wouldn’t be my concern. That just wouldn’t be my business.

While other parents shared his perception of private schools as less crowded and richer in social and cultural capital, John was the only parent to make the provocative claim that the ability to afford private school enrollment would allow him liberty from worrying about the quality public or charter schools. While provocative, his proposition is rebuffed by the fact that a considerable proportion of parents who participated in this study about public school choice had enrolled their children in private school at some point in their elementary school years, suggesting that private school enrollment does not necessarily negate concern for children in the public school sector, nor a desire for better public school choices.

In sum, parents’ private preferences, whether demonstrated through actual choices or analogies, were dialectically related to their deep frustration with and desire to distance and distinguish themselves from public schools. Exemplifying this dialectical tension, Michael -
who had a positive public school experience in South Carolina and was satisfied with the charter his son attends - asserted that “private school is the only option” for his family going forward because “it’s not looking good for public schools anywhere.” Echoing other parents’ perceptions of the financial investment in private school tuition spurring parental involvement and motivation, he described private schools as environments wherein:

I can basically have an active role in my child’s education ... You can do that in public schools as well, but I mean to completely control it. Because I just feel like in a private school setting, people take their jobs more seriously. Parents take that school a lot more seriously. They’ve invested, yes. Whether it be money or time or whatever ... Who knows?

Relatedly, the school-level characteristics parents associated with their private preferences can be reinterpreted as policy recommendations for neighborhood public schools, including: smaller class sizes, increased parental control and involvement, enhanced school responsiveness to parents, and access to radical and progressive pedagogy and curriculum (parents’ school level preferences will be explored in detail in Chapter 5). This is aligned to the market-based reform constructs of parents as customers and schools as consumer-responsive institutions. Finally, even parents with the capital required to afford elite independent school tuition voiced their concern about the lack of quality public choices in their neighborhood and chose private schools in predominately White and affluent neighborhoods far from their neighborhoods. Ultimately, regardless of school types, parents’ discursive valuation of private schooling over public actually expresses their preference for consumer-responsive schools serving children of vested parents that are often located in
relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods, a finding that will be discussed in the following section.

**Choice as a Means to Avoid Neighbors and Neighborhoods**

NYS charter law favors charters that intend to expand the range of public school choices where underperforming schools are concentrated. Consequentially, NYC charter organizations have disproportionately concentrated charters in predominately low-income and racially segregated neighborhoods of color. While charter proliferation has expanded the public school options in Black neighborhoods, the parents who participated in this study ultimately perceived choice as a means of escape from areas of concentrated poverty and their culturally devalued neighbors. This analysis will further demonstrate the extent to which parents have internalized the dominant narrative of engaging in school choice as good parenting and its effects, which include the conceptualization of neighbors who send their children to the neighborhood school as culturally deficient and of school choice as a means to achieve social distinction through objectified cultural capital acquisition. Relatedly, parents conceptualized the convenience of quality proximal schools as an unfeasible ideal, and conceptualized choice as a means to avoid areas of concentrated poverty and/or the social stigma of their own neighborhoods and access capital concentrated in culturally valued schools and neighborhoods.

**The Cultural Deficit of Neighbors**

Parents across the sample shared a multi-generational perception of the neighborhood kids who attended public schools as “rough” with some referring to engaging in school choice as a means of protecting their children from them. Moreover, some parents seemed to identify
the nature of neighborhood public school children and their parents as the root of public school problems. For instance, it was common for parents to describe the culture of non-selective Black neighborhood public schools as antithetical to academic achievement. Jasmine told a story of pulling her son out of a G&T program in a high-performing Park Slope public school after a child in the regular academic track bullied him for being identified as gifted. Similarly, Margaret shared a story about the students in her children’s out-of-zone public school perceiving her son as “Mr. Smarty Books,” describing the initial bullying he received as the “the same old public school story” wherein a “Black kid who reads the big books is going to get his ass kicked.” Explaining why the neighborhood public school in East New York was her “last, last, last resort,” Patricia – who first applied to charters but sent her child to parochial school after not being selected in a lottery - explained: “Um, not be bougie or anything, I just didn't like the kids that were going to that school... Kids are really rude, and disrespectful. Especially, as they get older. They're cussing.” This perception of public schools being unwelcoming or unsafe social environments for academically accelerated children is reminiscent of Robert's memory of it being “really rough” to have been academically advanced when he attended his neighborhood public school.

Most parents blamed the repulsive behavior of neighborhood public school students on poor parenting. Beverly associated her issue with the neighborhood public school that her child attended with poor parenting, explaining that the kids “had no discipline, no guidance” because their “parents weren’t teaching them anything.” Making her case, she said parents sent their children to school “with big bottles of soda and potato chips for breakfast everyday,” adding that they “get potato chips and crap to eat” when they go home and that
“the only time they eat is at school” because their “parents are just not there or just don't care or whatever the case may be.” Similarly, Sandra – whose child attended their district-zoned public school - described her frustration with poor parent participation on the PTA and turn out at a recent meeting about new math standards, reasoning:

Some people are more focused on education than others. Then other people see it as school is a drop off, a day care center where they don't do follow-up. There are people who don't know their children’s teachers. I mean that’s the reality. Best-case scenario, I’m the type parent that you would want in the school system, but the reality is there are other people who just don't care, and how do you reach them?

A school choice research has revealed the ways in which parents’ social capital shapes school choice preferences, with asymmetries of access to school choice information and resources by social class being a major equity concern (Bell, 2007; Holme, 2002; Sikkink and Emerson, 2008; Andre-Bechely, 2005; Teske, 2012; Villavicencio, 2013; Elacqua, 2005; Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, 2012). Less understood is the capital parents’ seek to acquire when they engage in school choice. Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (1998) frame parents choosing schools as the act of acquiring objectified cultural capital, arguing that the introduction of a hierarchy of schools created by school choice policies and the neoliberal discourse of “good parenting” being “centered on choice” has created a pathway through which families use schools of choice as convertible cultural goods that serve to enhance their social status, thus demarcate themselves from other parents (p. 393). This analysis also reveals instances of parents wishing to distinguish themselves from other neighborhood parents, conceptualizing choice as a means to acquire objectified cultural capital so as to enhance the social status of their family and their own social capital.
Parents echoed the dominant narrative that associates engagement in school choice with better parenting. For instance, after outlining her problems with public schools, Mariam – who attended parochial school in Cameroon and had the capital to afford sending all four children to private school - argued that the solution all “boils down to the parents, what you envision” then suggested that parents could be part of the solution to the public school crisis by “do[ing] your research, homework” and engaging in private or public school choice. Further, Delphine told a story celebrating her “international” best friend’s efforts to “make her research...[and] homework” despite being a busy recording artist then condemned parents who are “lazy” because they send their children to the neighborhood public school and do not do their “homework.” Making her case for rejecting public schools as an option, Delphine told a story about picking up public school children she tutored and being “shocked” by “the vocabulary and even the way the child behave (sic) and the parents are just sitting there.” She regularly juxtaposed her parenting with that of public school parents, explaining that public school parents “have tendency to think that education is to the teacher,” and positing that public schools have issues because they do not “see any response really from the parents.”

She began another story about attending a public school meeting for her friends by arguing that some public school parents are “lazy” because “when you want something for your child, trust me, you have to make your homework” and that sending children to the “school next door” is “too easy.” Despite the fact that she was attending the meeting as a proxy for friends who were public school parents who could not attend, she described her surprise at not seeing many parents at the meeting and chastised absent parents: “This is your child. We're
talking about your child’s education. What’s your child going to become tomorrow?” She then made a case for school choice as good parenting, claiming: “When you want something, you can get it. Unless you ignorant (sic) and you’re in your box, and you don’t want to.”

Contrasting her engagement in school choice and related sacrifices as good parenting with that of public school parents, she shared:

I hear also parents who tell me, “Whoa, I would not do that for my child, whoa, wake up at 4, 5 o’clock in the morning, go all the way in Bed Stuy. Uh, uh, no.” Well, if you have to be, even in Washington, if it’s for good, yes, I do it also. This is my priority.

Also identifying as involved public school parents who care and juxtaposing themselves with those who do not, Deborah and Ebenita perceived choice as a means to access seats in parent-responsive schools who appreciate good parents like them. Deborah – whose children attended the neighborhood school that she was very unhappy with - told stories about her frustration with the neighborhood public school’s resistance to her concerns, reasoning that “I’m probably the only one complaining” and “I think they don’t like the fact that ... It just feel like I care too much.” Ebenita contrasted her positive experiences as an involved charter school parent with her negative experiences in her neighborhood school that felt unwelcoming and uninviting and had a PTA that was “more political than anything else” and not “very empowering to parents” because “it had nothing to do with making any choices that would impact kids.”

Parents also perceived choice as a means of joining a community of parents who share the same cultural capital or as a means to increasing social capital. Delphine distinguished herself and her charter school community from parents who do not choose or do their
“homework” and also shared her perception of charters as places where immigrant families concentrate. Yvonne spoke of the necessity of choosing schools outside of her Brownsville neighborhood in order to find school communities comprised of parents’ with values that matched her own. Beverly spoke of using choice to avoid public school parents who she perceived as “not motivated” and “interested” in their children's development.

In addition, they perceived engaging in choice as a means of distinction. For instance, Richard - whose children all attended neighborhood public schools and who believed that his daughter was too aggressive for charters - told a derisive story about a woman who lived in his building who “wasn’t bright as a parent” and was “somewhat illiterate,” yet “thought she was uppity” because she enrolled her children in charters. He rationalized that she felt superior as a charter school parent “because she felt that made a statement...that she was better than other people.” Referring to this mother again later in the interview, he argued that by choosing a charter she was “try[ing] to be something she ain’t” because she “figure[d] she put the kids in charter school would make her look, would make her shine.”

Relatedly, Delphine - who sent her child to a charter – believed that her Brownsville neighbors perceived her as uppity precisely because she was a charter school parent. She shared a story about being “aggressed” by a neighbor who she imagined thinking:

"Who does she think she is? Oh, don't know why she thinks"...because I have a European like accent so. "Oh, she thinks she's White? Oh now, oh yeah, she thinks that she's better, her daughter is better than us because she goes to a charter school.”
Delphine also told a story about an exchange with a public school principal who became “aggressive” and emphasized the fact that she had a PhD after Delphine shared that she sent her child to a charter. Delphine interpreted the public school principal’s reaction to charters and aggression as attempt to imply: “we’re not that bad.” John believed that children attending different schools within in his daughter’s school building were receiving different educations, and that this led to people “think they’re better than the next person,” and imagining that charter parents reason: “Oh, my kid is better than your kid, because they go to a charter school.”

In sum, parents echoed the dominant narrative of “‘good parenting” being “centered on choice” (Ball and Vincent 1998) in associating the neighborhood public schools they rejected as options or planned to escape with poor parenting. They juxtaposed what they perceived as lazy, unmotivated, and absentee public school parenting with their engagement in choice as a form of good parenting. Parents perceived schools of choice as environments where good parents like them are concentrated, empowered, and encouraged to be involved. Further, they acquired objectified cultural capital through membership in socially valued school communities like charters and recognized the distinction that membership in these social networks proffered to parents. Parents’ efforts to use choice to distance themselves from the negative effects of poor parenting they perceived to be concentrated in their neighborhood public schools and to acquire objectified cultural capital that they could symbolically exchange for increased social capital and distinction often required parents to choose schools outside of their neighborhoods.

*Neighborhood Preferences*
Behind parents’ negative perceptions of public school parents and efforts to acquire distinction through engaging in school choice were their negative perceptions of and efforts to distance their families from their racially segregated neighborhoods through choice. Despite “widespread, but marginal” advancements in “education, income, and labor market success” since the civil rights era, research finds that Black Americans continue to live in neighborhoods that are “markedly less affluent and more segregated than those occupied by whites of similar status” and are more “economically depressed [and] violent” than any other racial or ethnic group (Sharkey, 2013, p. 104, 15). Neighborhoods are sites for the transmission of racial inequality because important aspects of social life, such as schools, are organized by geography or space; this is especially true for Black Americans who live in proximity to urban ghettos and housing projects where poverty is disproportionately concentrated (Sharkey, 2013). All twenty parents in this sample shared the dilemma of raising children in predominately low-income racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where underperforming schools have been disproportionately concentrated for generations and they conceptualized choice as a means to escape negative neighborhood effects.

Many parents expressed strong preferences for private and public schools that were located away from concentrated poverty or completely outside of their neighborhoods. Ten parents who made public school choices and four parents who made private school choices during some point in their children’s elementary school years choose schools in outside neighborhoods characterized by less poverty and racial isolation. Specifically, the predominately affluent and White neighborhoods of Park Slope or downtown Brooklyn
factored heavily in parents’ preferences. That said, parents conceptualized zoning both as a policy designed to trap them in racially segregated, under-resourced, and under-performing neighborhood schools and restrict their access to quality public schools. Before describing parents who send their children to public school as “lazy,” Delphine – who lived in Brownsville but enrolled her daughter in a charter located in the increasingly economically and racially mixed neighborhood of Bed Stuy - shared the following critique of zoning:

It’s pretty much like putting in jail. Just because I live in an area, I’m supposed to have my child go to school with the same people in the same area. And what about if I really, I choose that I don’t want, I want better for my child? And that is a choice that parents don’t have.

This statement suggests that Delphine did not see the purpose of sending her to school with neighbors who she perceived as inferior. Similarly, Mariam – who sent her children to an elite independent private school in downtown Brooklyn - described her disappointment with the poor quality of American public schools, stressing her belief that “education starts from home” and her frustration with the policy that “everything has to be zoned,” forcing her to send her children to the same public school as her neighbors’ children who were raised in predominately low-income and inferior home environments.

Others conceptualized zoning as a policy designed to keep them out of high-performing schools in more affluent and less segregated neighborhoods. Nailah decried the fact that “people are forced into a zone school” and argued that the “the educational system is segregated because it’s based on zones and where you live.” She explained that her problem with “just sending my child to a zone school” was her belief that children “need to know how to navigate many different cultures, but yet the zone school is maybe 98% Black or 96% and
2% Spanish, whatever it is.” On the other hand, she shared a story about a conflict over zoning in the Park Slope public school her children attended wherein the principal fought to maintain an inclusive admissions policy against parents who wanted to make the school completely zoned so as to keep outsiders like her from competing for or taking up highly-coveted seats. She explained that zoning is ultimately used to segregate people away from educational opportunities, stating: “Parents in those [relatively affluent and predominately White] communities would like to just put a lock on all of that, so zoning protects their interests to preserve it for the future of their children who are in that community.” Sandra - who was unable to get her child into her preferred school in an affluent neighborhood because of zoning restrictions - similarly described zoning as designed “to keep the neighborhood demographics and the classes to reflect the neighborhood” and argued: “most people like the status quo, demographically wise. That's why some schools are zone schools and some aren’t.”

Whether critiquing zoning as a trap or an obstruction, a major theme across nearly all parents’ school choice stories was the desire to use school choice to escape the negative effects and culturally devalued institutions within their predominately low-income and racially segregated neighborhoods. Key to parents’ negative associations with their neighborhood public schools were their perceptions of their neighborhoods as rife with social problems related to concentrated urban poverty. Parents living in Brownsville described an area ghettoized by a history of drug epidemics and redlining and a consequential slew of social issues including: single mothers living in poverty, gun violence, a lack of quality school or food choices, and a lack of gentrification. Parents living in East New
York neighborhoods referred to issues related to geographic isolation and neighbors’ low levels of education. Parents living in Bed Stuy - an area drastically transformed by gentrification in recent years - referred to gun violence, the predominance of single mothers, and high rates of homelessness, with one mother sharing that she rarely allows her children to play outside of her apartment. These negative neighborhood experiences and associations significantly influenced parents’ school preferences and choices.

As Courtney Bell (2007; 2009) has demonstrated in her research on geographic preferences, parents express both spatial preferences related to distance and time and placed-based preferences related to “the meanings people assign to particular locations” that are shaped by a place’s “history, peoples, and purposes within the political, social, and economic landscape” (2007, p. 378). Unlike other school choice studies that find spatial factors delimiting parents’ choice sets (Pattillo, 2015; Teske, 2012; Schneider, et.al, 2000), all other parents explained that a nearby school would be ideal, yet they did not have the luxury of a preference for convenience through proximity because they perceived a paucity of quality options near their homes. When speaking of their spatial preferences, parents did refer to spatial considerations including travel time or transportation and a desire for the convenience of a quality proximal school. However, Michellene - an immigrant from Haiti whose son first attended the neighborhood zoned public school then a nearby charter - was the only parent in the sample who mentioned explicit preference for and choice of schools specifically because of their convenient proximity to her home.

Other parents also mentioned spatial factors when discussing their preferences. Ebenita identified transportation issues as a major barrier to genuine school choice for her and other
parents living in her very remote neighborhood of Starret City; however, her children were
selected in a lottery by a charter located nearly an hour away by public transportation in
Brownsville, so time and transportation issues were a significant element of her school
choice stories but not a delimitation to her choice. Yvonne frequently referred to the burden
of always having to drive outside of Brownsville to access resources like quality food or
public schools and shared a story about her excitement about the original location of her
son’s charter, explaining that it was only “seven car minutes” away from her home “which
hasn’t happened, because I’m used to driving.” Margaret described her recent decision to
send both children to a high-performing out-of-zone public school as a decision to take a
break from the labor of choosing schools far from home and an effort to make her life
“simple” for one or two years by only having to drive 10 blocks to the school. Similarly,
Patricia chose a parochial school in order to stay in her East New York neighborhood, sharing
her related messaging about her choice to stay in the neighborhood and school achievement
to her children as follows:

I want them to know that, “do your best. Go to your potential, the heights of
your potential...” so that I know as a parent that I did the best for that kid as a
parent. Cause you’re living in a neighborhood like East New York. There’s not
a big success rate of people going further than high school and stuff like that,
so I want my children to be a part of their neighborhood, that there is a way
that you can still live in an urban neighborhood and still succeed and go to
college or go to vocational school or be a professional or be an entrepreneur.
Your environment doesn’t have to dictate who you become.

While Patricia expressed a preference to stay in their neighborhood that she realized through
private school choice, it is clear that she associates her neighborhood with a historic lack of
academic success and that she wants her children to succeed academically in site of negative neighborhood influences.

Such place-based neighborhood associations were a far more prevalent factor shaping parents’ preferences, with a repulsive effect from certain school locations or neighborhoods and a draw to others. The preceding section argued that parents voiced a preference for school with social networks composed of parents who share their values and beliefs, often demonstrated by the fact that they actively engaged in school choice. Parents’ place-based associations with school neighborhoods further demonstrate how parents utilize choice not only as a way to escape negative neighborhood effects of racial segregation and concentrated poverty and avoid the social stigma associated with it and to acquire objectified cultural capital that enhances their social status, demarcating them from their neighbors by preferring and choosing schools in more affluent and/or Whiter neighborhoods. In other words, parents living in less affluent, more violent, and more segregated Black neighborhoods recognized a hierarchy of schools that was often determined by location or neighborhood and often used school choice as a means to access schools in more affluent neighborhoods and the social networks and status connected to them.

Often, parents’ placed-based associations with their own or other predominately low-income and racially segregated Black neighborhoods served as a repellent. Amber shared her surprise in finding what she considers to be a quality neighborhood public school just down the street for her home after years of struggling to avoid sending her children to schools in her Bed Stuy neighborhood. She perceived choosing a school in her neighborhood of Bed Stuy as socially stigmatizing until she was proven wrong after enrolling her son in the
neighborhood school as a “last resort” and being “happily surprised” with the school. Reflecting on how everything turned out, she stated: “Right in the heart of where you live and I would have never put my child there. That’s like a stigma. Like, oh, not in my area.” Delphine - who wakes up at 4 or 5am every morning to transport her daughter from their Brownsville neighborhood to a charter located in Bed Stuy – shared her conceptualization of charter hierarchy as determined by neighborhood. She critiqued decisions to locate charters in her neighborhood, stating: “I notice that, around this area here, Brownsville, [whispers] there are a lot of charters…Okay, is it because of the cost of the building, the rents? I think we can find better.” In other words, Delphine perceived charters as superior to public schools, but ascribed less value, and social stigma, to charters located in her neighborhood of Brownsville.

In addition to using school choice to avoid schools in their own neighborhoods, parents considering charters also explicitly ruled out schools located near, thus assumed to primarily serve, public housing projects where urban poverty is concentrated. For instance, Yvonne – a community organizer and educational activist by profession who lived in Brownsville – self-reflectively referred to her “class thing” before explaining that she pulled her son out of a charter after it moved to a new school building proximal to a housing project. (This theme of charters moving locations affected other parents and will be further explored in Chapter 6.) Yvonne also spoke of ruling a popular public school in her neighborhood of Brownsville out because the school hired people from the neighborhood and she believed:

if you’re hiring people from the community right, then you’re bringing whatever issues they have, whatever issues are present, whatever challenges are present, it is coming into ... whether it’s skills, lack of skills set, people are not at capacity, it’s coming into the organization.
Parents’ place-based associations with external neighborhoods also served as a draw. Explicitly referring to the racial politics of using school choice to escape neighborhood schools, Cynthia shared a story about attaining a work variance to pull her son out of a school in Bed Stuy then having to “beg and plead” for a seat in a public school located in a largely Jewish and non-Black immigrant neighborhood in southeast Brooklyn, where he was “the only Black child in the class.” She explained that she chose that public school in that neighborhood because she figured: “he's in this all, practically White school, and, it'd be better, it will just be better.” Notably, while she chose a school in an neighborhood with a large Orthodox Jewish population, an ethnic group she classifies as White, she also acknowledged that they predominately use private religious schools and that the public school was actually composed of Mexicans and Asians. This disconnect demonstrates how significant the concept of neighborhood is in shaping parents’ preferences, as Cynthia was actually speaking of neighborhood demographics, not school demographics, when explaining the rationale for her choice. While another parent also referred to her preference for a public school located in another predominately White southeast Brooklyn neighborhood, the relatively affluent and predominately White Park Slope and downtown Brooklyn neighborhoods that are proximal to the borough of Manhattan factored strongly as preferences in over half of parents’ school choice stories.

New York Magazine describes Park Slope as a neighborhood that is “slightly below average” in affordability and diversity and “blessed with excellent public schools, low crime, vast stretches of green space, scores of restaurants and bars, a diverse retail sector, and a population of…artists and creative.” Almost half of Park Slope is ‘White alone” and roughly a
quarter identifies as “three or more races;” the median household income, median rent, and housing values are roughly double that of the average for NYC; and the poverty rate is less than half (City-Data.com). Significantly, parents made intra-neighborhood distinctions for Park Slope, referring to the fact that resources are concentrated at the center of the neighborhood, and that this is where they focused their search. For instance, Jasmine spoke of her preference for a school located in “middle Park Slope” and Yvonne made the distinction that her children’s school was located in “Park Slope central,” referring to another school as located “in Park Slope but it’s like with the beginning of Sunset Park, so now you go to like a heavily Latino.”

Eleven parents referred to Park Slope and the schools within it in their school choice stories, and they often associated Park Slope schools with diversity. For instance, Margaret explained that the school her children attended in Park Slope “has a very diverse population that comes from all over Brooklyn.” Speaking to the racial politics of a preference for Park Slope schools, Amber stated:

Like I personally, like if I could have, if I was zoned or could have placed my kids in a school in Park Slope, that's where they were going. I love diversity. You can't [laughs], not to be funny but, I don't want to be nowhere, honestly, with all just Black people all the time and that's just me.

Relatedly, Robert shared an email exchange he had had with another Black parent (who did not participate in this study) who associated what she perceived as Park Slope diversity with safety, writing: “It makes me feel very sad because I know there is no place as diverse as NYC yet it is so segregated...my daughter is scared walking around bed stuy but not in park slope (sic).” On the other hand, instead of describing as diverse, Sandra made the frustrated
distinction that Park Slope and downtown Brooklyn schools are actually "heavily segregated" yet the schools in her Black neighborhood of East Flatbush “are more segregated.” (Diversity is a strong school choice preference with a complicated meaning for parents that will be further analyzed in Chapter 5.)

Parents also associated Park Slope with progressive school philosophies. Jasmine - who had a strong preference for private schools - shared a story about touring a Park Slope public school in were the "children were very artistic and self-spoken," adding that she was "so proud of them." In another instance, Daphne expressed concern that proposed charters for Park Slope and other neighborhoods with similar demographics by the charter school organization were "going to look very progressive" compared to the charters run by the same management organization located in the neighborhood of Bed Stuy “where you couldn't go to a progressive fuzzy school...to save your life.”

Finally, parents also associated Park Slope with concentrated resources and capital. Parents not only travelled to Park Slope in search of available seats in quality schools, but also for access to a variety of quality food and other goods. Yvonne explained that people in her high-poverty Brownsville neighborhood “are so used to driving to get what we need because we don’t have it in our communities, because the places that we can afford to live in or that are familiar to us...don’t support that.” She explained that stores in her neighborhood smell “funny” and prices are inflated and that she desired “choice and different experiences” like the opportunity to "eat pizza" and Thai food, not “just Chinese food.” She then contrasted her experience as a consumer in Brownsville with that of Park Slope where “every resource or service” is in walking distance for its residents.
Other parents conceptualized Park Slope schools as serving families with concentrations of culturally valued capital. Jasmine spoke of her interest in a public school located in the “middle of Park Slope,” sharing her belief that her son “fit” into the demographics of the school even though she “wasn’t a lawyer or a doctor” or “necessarily a pearl-wearing, blue suit [laughs], Fortune 500” parent” then added the disclaimer that she was “getting up my ladder.” Nailah – who lived in Crown Heights and had used a variance to send her children to a popular public school in Park Slope - told a story about the Park Slope public school’s ability to raise “tremendous amounts of money...to fill the budget gaps from the money that was cut off by the DOE” and mentioned disparities in property taxes to explain her understanding of the entrenched effect of segregation on schools.

More affluent parents who could afford private school tuition referred their “local” preference for schools within the borough of Brooklyn, as opposed to Manhattan, and enrolled their children in elite independent schools located in more affluent and predominately White neighborhoods which they informally referred to as downtown Brooklyn. Officially referred to as “the greater downtown Brooklyn area,” the New York State Comptroller (2014) describes this cluster of neighborhoods as proximal to Manhattan and home to Brooklyn’s “better paying jobs,” “major cultural institutions...and several major academic institutions.” Collectively, the area is over 40% White, with over 50% of adults holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, less than 20% of people living in poverty, and much higher median household incomes compared to the rest of Brooklyn (Center for the Study of Brooklyn, 2012).
In addition to its progressive philosophy of instruction and pedagogy, Daphne also explained that she appreciated the fact the elite independent school her children attended in downtown Brooklyn “caters to the neighborhood,” meaning the school was responsive to parents with far more capital than her neighbors. She also appreciated that the school had “a different racial makeup” because, unlike her children, most of the students lived in the neighborhood.

Robert and Mariam – who initially perceived enrolling their children in a neighborhood public school as being involved in their Bed Stuy neighborhood - also sent their children to an elite independent school in downtown Brooklyn. As a result of joining the school community in downtown Brooklyn, they asserted that their only connections to their Bed Stuy neighborhood were the church, their children's music school and “one or two close friends.” Explicitly disassociating themselves from their residential neighborhood, they complained that they lacked a community in Bed Stuy and described their neighborhood as a place where they “camped” or “where we go to bed...to sleep.” In contrast, they thought of themselves as members of their school neighborhood community, explaining that their “real groups of friends, people we hung out with most, were downtown” to the extent that “people actually thought that we lived in downtown Brooklyn because we spent so much time there and we just came home in the evening.” Their school choice story exemplifies how parents use the location of a school to accrue objectified cultural capital and social status and as a means to escape the social stigma of their home neighborhood. While they were frustrated that they could not afford a residential move to their preferred neighborhood of downtown Brooklyn, by choosing an elite independent school located in the neighborhood, they dissociated
themselves from the culturally devalued neighborhood of Bed Stuy and joined the a social network of parents with concentrated economic, social, and cultural capital.

In sum, parents’ spatial and place-based associations with Brooklyn neighborhoods shaped parents’ school preferences. Parents felt trapped in their racially segregated neighborhoods and recognized that public, charter, and private school resources and culturally ascribed status were determined by school locations. They conceptualized zoning as a policy designed to trap them inside their neighborhoods where urban poverty and culturally devalued schools are disproportionately concentrated and to repel them from accessing seats in culturally valued public schools located in more affluent and Whiter neighborhoods. While six of twenty parents expressed a desire for a proximal school, only one parent’s preferences were determined and delimited by school proximity. On the other hand, parents contrasted denigrated place-based associations of their own neighborhoods and areas of concentrated poverty with that of more affluent and/or Whiter neighborhoods to determine their choice sets and choices. Parents avoided their racially segregated neighborhood schools and charters located near housing projects to escape the negative effects of concentrated urban poverty as well as the social stigma related to their neighborhood. Conversely, they voiced strong preferences schools located in more affluent and/or Whiter neighborhoods, which they associated with diversity, progressivism, more resources, and the opportunity to gain social status through membership in a social network of parents with more economic, social, and cultural capital.
Discussion

This chapter analyzed the ways in which parents’ habitus – or the partially unconscious dispositions towards culture, society, and one’s future that people learn from family as children and take for granted as common sense or inevitable - shaped their school choice preferences in the context of racially segregated Black neighborhoods where urban poverty and underperforming schools have been disproportionately concentrated for generations. Parents’ preferences were shaped by history. Their schooling and neighborhood experiences as Black children in the post-civil rights and post-colonial era and their related perceptions of the parental labor of choice for Black families influenced their school preferences for their own children. Instead of understanding Black parents who engage in choice as duped or consenting by merely internalizing and echoing the dominant narratives of dominant groups, this analysis highlighted the generational and socio-geographic nature of Black parents’ school choice logic undergirding their propensity to use choice to avoid their neighborhood public schools. The analysis of parents’ biographies also served as a reminder of the extent to which the choice landscape has changed over the relatively short course of their lifetimes.

Parents voiced a strong preference for private schooling that was rooted in their place-dependent childhood school experiences combined with dominant narratives of public school failure and engaging in choice as good parenting that they encountered while raising children in this context. Importantly, parents’ private preferences were less a preference for private schools, per se, than a dialectical critique of public schools. Whether their children attended private schools or they described the public schools that they were satisfied with as being “like private” schools, parents associated private schooling with: diversity; increased
parental involvement and control; school accountability and responsiveness to parents; high academic standards; and progressive structure, curriculum, and pedagogy. The qualities that parents associate with private schooling can be easily reinterpreted as a political framework and explicit demands for public school reform. Although parents echoed the dominant narrative of public schools as failing and privatization as solutions, they also recognized that culturally valued public schools and programs like Gifted & Talented exist within a hierarchy of public school choice types that is often determined by the geographic location of the school.

Parents raising children in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black neighborhoods shared the dilemma of passing these neighborhoods and the related effects of concentrated urban poverty on to their children by raising them there (Sharkey, 2013). Recognizing this problem of generationally entrenched residential racial segregation, they conceptualized choice as a solution in that it served as a means to escape negative neighborhood effects and culturally devalued families and schools and access culturally valued schools and neighborhoods with more resources and capital. Parents critiqued zoning as a policy designed to trap them in schools negatively impacted by the poor parenting of their neighbors and to delimit their access to quality public schools and social networks comprised of parents with more culturally valued capital. While NYS charter law favors the expansion of charters where underperforming schools are concentrated and NYC charter organizations have disproportionately concentrated charters in Black neighborhoods, Black parents’ place-based associations repelled them from areas of concentrated poverty and their own neighborhoods and shaped their preference for schools located in relatively
affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. In other words, while charter proliferation has expanded the public schools choices in their neighborhoods, the majority Black parents who participated in this study ultimately perceived choice as a means to escape the negative effects of concentrated poverty and the stigma of their culturally devalued neighbors and/or neighborhoods.

Additional policy lessons emerge from these findings. School choice advocates argue that educational researchers who critique inequality use concentrated poverty and the societal dysfunction produced by it as “excuses” for “widespread, chronic educational failure” while there is evidence of charters that “do splendidly on state assessments” in racially isolated and high poverty areas (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 43, 49). These parents’ preferences suggest that increasing school choices through charter proliferation despite addressing poverty and its neighborhood effects is insufficient, at best. Parents’ choice sets were strongly influenced by their efforts to avoid areas of concentrated poverty and public schools that serve their low-income neighbors. This suggests that parents were much less invested in the policy objectives of neighborhood market-based education reforms than in the policy objectives of racial and socioeconomic integration. Thus, in addition to expanding choices within Black neighborhoods through charters, choice policy should also better support Black parents’ continued desire for integration.

Finally, it is evident that parents internalized the dominant narratives of public school crisis and engagement in school choice as good parenting and that this has led to parents discursively valuing private over public schooling and perceiving neighbors who send their children to the neighborhood public school as deficient. The problems of discursive cultural
devaluation of public schooling and the splintering effect these narratives have amongst neighbors require an increased focus and dissemination of counter-stories about quality public schools in Black neighborhoods and of alternative frameworks of good parenting within those and other neighborhood schools such as parent involvement and organizing.
Chapter 5

THE CLASS DIVERSITY OF BLACK PARENTS’ SCHOOL-LEVEL PREFERENCES

ED’s mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

-U.S. Department of Education’s mission statement

In addition to socio-geographic preferences, parents who participated in this study also articulated school-level preferences and differed in how they conceptualized and were able to access preferred educational models according to social class. National school choice preference survey research reveals that parents predictably identify school-level variables such as teacher quality, curriculum, achievement, safety, and discipline when developing their choice sets (Richardson and Bushaw, 2015; Schneider, et al., 2000; Teske, 2012; Chapman and Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011). This chapter analyzes the distinctive ways parents conceptualized choice as a means through which their children could access and acquire dominant cultural capital – high status cultural and linguistic knowledge, skills, and dispositions with convertible social value – in order to promote social and economic mobility in an increasingly competitive and globalizing society. Parents internalized the dominant narrative equating the purpose of quality schooling with preparation for success in college and successful competition in a globalized society and job market. They also dialectically perceived school choice as the pursuit of dominant cultural capital and neighborhood public schools as incapable of meeting this objective. However, they had different class-based
understandings of what type of dominant cultural capital training was necessary for preparation for success in college and a global society and job market and they preferred different educational models as a result.

This analysis begins with parents’ dialectical critique of neighborhood public schools’ school-level characteristics in which they internalized dominant narratives blaming bureaucracy and teachers’ unions for public schools crisis while also subverting these dominant narratives by identifying a lack of funding and over-testing. Their school-level preferences were often framed as the alternative to the public school issues they identified. Conversely, this chapter also demonstrates that parents expressed a mix of scant preferences for and critiques of schooling as non-dominant cultural capital acquisition through Afrocentric curriculum or educational models, challenging the argument that autonomy through choice creates opportunities for schools to continue the legacy of community control and Black Power and Nationalist movements (Stulberg, 2008; 2004) and for parents to act on their preference for ethnocentric schooling as a form of “racial protectionism” (Mazama and Lundy, 2015; 2012, p. 12).

Instead, Black parents interviewed for this study conceptualized choice as the pursuit of dominant cultural capital, yet their school-level preferences diverged in terms of social class. Charters located in Black Brooklyn neighborhoods more often than not employ a “no excuses” educational model characterized by “back-to-basics” curriculum and pedagogy, extended school schedules, “zero tolerance” disciplinary practices, and parent contracts (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p.43). The aim of these charters is to engage students in rigorous dominant cultural capital training in preparation for college and career. While
waiting list numbers and parents’ school choice stories suggest a high-demand for such charters, research has also documented troubling ways that they impede racial educational equity, including harsh disciplinary measures, under enrollment or exclusion of special needs students, racial disparities in suspension and expulsion rates, and high student attrition (White, 2015). Primarily low-income parents in this sample expressed a preference for the “no excuses” model and conceptualized enrollment in such charters as a means for their children to acquire dominant cultural capital while also recognizing this controversy. This analysis documents the rationale they use to explain their preference for “no excuses” charters in light of the debate they have engendered within Black schools and neighborhoods. Their preferences will be analyzed as examples of “subaltern agency” in which parents rationally and tactically make the best of their options in an uneven school choice marketplace and society (Pedroni, 2007).

On the other hand, other NYC public choice policies such as unzoned schools or district-granted variances also provide parents with access to strikingly dissimilar progressive educational models. While progressive school reforms hearken back to the early 1900s with efforts to reframe public schools as institutions that address community needs and social problems, the progressive education model most evident in NYC today is rooted in a post-WWI NYC school reform effort focused upon “freeing individual potential” through “child-centered pedagogy” (Ravitch, 2000, p. 233). Progressive educational models share John Dewey’s (1938) philosophy that schools should: nurture the expression and cultivation of individuality; allow for free activity; develop skills and knowledge through experiences related to students’ present life; and embrace a changing world. They are also guided by
Maria Montessori’s (1994) beliefs that children are innately eager to learn and capable of initiating learning and that they will learn discipline through liberty and action (Montessori, 1994). The locations of “no excuses” charters and progressive educational models differ as drastically as the philosophies guiding them, with private and public progressive schools concentrated in relatively affluent and Whiter Brooklyn neighborhoods. Primarily middle-class parents in this sample expressed a strong preference for progressive schooling, which they also conceptualized as an opportunity for their children to acquire dominant cultural capital acquisition.

This chapter investigates parents’ class-based conceptualizations of schools of choice as the means to dominant cultural capital acquisition. Low-income parents tended to believe that the “back-to-basics” curriculum and “no excuses” discipline in charters was essential training for low-income children. On the other hand, middle-class parents agreed that this type of schooling was necessary dominant cultural capital training for low-income children yet preferred a progressive schools for their own children instead. This chapter will demonstrate that, for these parents, there was no ethically sound universal academic program for all children; instead they tended to agree that families of different socio-economic positions have different academic needs and preferences, and that all would benefit from the ability to choose from more differentiated public school markets in their Black neighborhoods. That said, parents across the sample expressed a strong aversion to segregated schools and frustrated preference for schools with racially and ethnically diverse schools, which served as a discursive proxy for access to Whiteness and affluence, or what they conceptualized as a route to dominant cultural capital acquisition. Before comparing and contrasting parents’
school-level preferences, however, this chapter begins with their dialectical critique of public school bureaucracy.

**Persisting Issues With Bureaucracy**

As the previous chapter demonstrated, many parents echoed the dominant narrative of public school failure and crisis when explaining the rationale for their school preferences, echoing dominant framing of neighborhood zoning policy as a core impediment to racial educational equity. In addition to parents’ association of neighborhood public schools with concentrated poverty and a lack of diversity, parents generally held a complex critique of school bureaucracy that is rooted in people of colors’ historical struggle for equity in urban public school systems. In NYC, this struggle extends over sixty years back to Black and Puerto Rican parent protests, school boycotts, occupations of government offices, and demands for community control during the 1950s and 60s.

Most parents framed New York City’s Department of Education (NYCDOE) as the primary antagonist in their school choice stories, with several internalizing the dominant narrative of bureaucracy impeding school-level accountability, receptivity, and creativity that is often used as rationale for market-based choice policies. When asked why charters are popular at the local and national level, Daphne – who sent her children to private school - first blamed teacher unions then described bureaucracies as “tough,” “big,” and “unwieldy,” explaining that the school district is using charters for their “expediency” because “we know we have to fix something.” Describing the public school system as “a behemoth” and “archaic,” Margaret – who sent her children to charter, private, and out-of-zone public schools - argued that public “institutions exist to perpetuate themselves” and the NYCDOE has not kept pace with
other societal advancements like fuel-efficient cars. Jasmine – whose son attended G&T and private schools - shared her belief that public schools will not improve until:

they shake up the public school system and start making it better on all different levels from the DOE bureaucracy to how they hire teachers and tend to them and how they grade [the schools].

Discussing the competitive pressure imposed upon on public schools by charters, her cynicism about unions and bureaucracy was exemplified by the rhetorical question: “So is that [the pressure] registering to someone at, you know, UFT or DOE, ‘What can we do better?’ or are they just looking around going, ‘Let’s get rid of those things [charters], they’re making us look bad’?”

In addition to critiques, parents shared stories of specific ways that the Department of Education had been inefficient and unresponsive to their needs. Deborah was deeply unhappy with the neighborhood public school her children attended and was frustrated that “no one hears this or hears my complaints at the Department of Education because they don’t ever respond to me.” Speaking to the protracted history of parents of colors’ conflict with neighborhood schools and bureaucracy, she added that “I think this stuff’s been going on so long, and here I come trying to say something’s wrong with it, and people are looking at me weird.” In other words, she senses that people working for the NYCDOE have become inured to school failure. Speaking to her deep distrust of the administration, Cynthia sensed that the district intentionally misdiagnosed her special needs son as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) “to save money because, ED, they can just throw them into a special education classroom inside
their, inside of BOE (sic), but if they would have said autism he would have, they would have to pay for the private school."

Other parents subverted the dominant narrative by introducing critiques of capitalism and systemic inequity, suggesting that they are frustrated but do not perceive dismantling bureaucracy as the solution. For instance, after explaining that she perceives charters as “the lesser of the two evils,” Beverly posited:

> Why is the free school system in such a mess that anyone without money can’t be educated? It’s all because of bureaucracy and money. It has to do with money and money and money and money and that’s it.

Parents also highlighted the irony of school administrations like Bloomberg’s framing of bureaucracy as the problem in promoting charters while simultaneously recentralizing administrative power and control over public schools. For instance, Sandra highlighted the irony of framing bureaucracy as the problem during a period of mayoral control, stating:

> It’s way more involved than just like, “Oh look, we’ll remove the bureaucracy.” If that’s the case, why does the mayor have control of the Department of Ed? Bloomberg literally took control of the Department of Ed. It was not under the jurisdiction of the mayor before. Literally he puts in whoever (sic) he wants to and they mime and puppetry or whatever he wants done. So if it's really a problem for you [Bloomberg], why do you want control of it? If you have control of it, why is it not doing better? You're three terms in.

Similarly, Margaret believed that the Bloomberg administration was biased towards charters, and that this effectively related the following message to the public:

> We can’t do this job. We need to fall on our sword and give the job to our charter schools because we suck. We fail. We need to put ourselves out of business and privatize ourselves.
Parents perceived public school teachers as incompetent, uncaring, sometimes negligent, and unaccountable, often echoing the dominant narrative that teachers’ unions promote the interests of adult teachers ahead of and at expense to the interests of children. Speaking of public school teacher inadequacies, John - who attended public school and had children in both public and charters - complained that he has to “be the teacher” when his son came home from school and that his daughter was not learning the correct way to write sentences. Daphne – whose children attended private school - described the poor quality of teachers in the public schools that she had visited before her children were school-age as “an absolute deal breaker,” critiquing the union because there are “some really heartbreakingly bad teachers out there, and instead of doing the right thing and changing the life of one person, we change the life of hundreds.” Speaking to the racial politics of this issue, Jasmine – whose child attended G&T and private schools – argued that public schools in Black neighborhoods do not receive the “same teaching quality.” It is important to note that these parents are not only echoing dominant discourses, they are also drawing observations from racialized lived experiences verified by research that finds substantially less-qualified teachers are concentrated in low-income urban neighborhoods (Lankford, et.al, 2002; Jacob, 2007; Buddin and Zamarro, 2009).

Twelve parents characterized their neighborhood public schools as lacking in safety, discipline, and structure. After blaming other children’s parenting (see Chapter 4) they identified unqualified or uncaring teachers as the source of this problem, citing a lack of structure or abusive behavior. Referencing the racialized school-to-prison pipeline (Wald
and Losen, 2003), Nailah described the neighborhood public school her older children had attended as “just very rough,” explaining that teachers bullied students and administrators hired “whoever can manage kids.” In fact, she remembered thinking to herself: “This feels like they’re bringing the kids for prison” and worrying that the school was “changing” her children for the worse. Making her case against the neighborhood public school her children attended, Deborah described the neighborhood public school her children attended as “unorganized” and the staff as “incompetent,” sharing stories about teachers’ inability to quiet children in the auditorium and a school dance that “was just wild kids” with “no games” and music that was “ridiculous for our kids.” Referencing abusive behavior, her child also told her: “the teacher tells the students to ‘shut-up’” and “I just saw a lady grab this little boy's arm and pull him back in the classroom.” Michael explained that their family ruled out the neighborhood public school after merely observing the playground, citing the way that “some faculty members are with the children” as “deterrent enough,” remarking that it is “not a surprise” that the school is low-performing.

Parents echoed dominant narratives in critiquing teacher unions and framing the profession of teaching as a government jobs program, yet often subverted them by telling contradictory stories about caring teachers or their personal connections with teachers. For instance, John stated that public school teachers are only “there for a paycheck” then immediately contradicted himself by sharing a story about “good” teachers at his son’s school who “really help.” Furthermore, outlining her issues with NYC public schools, Mariam –whose children attended an elite independent school - critiqued the NYC teacher union’s resistance to teacher evaluations, arguing:
Even the teachers; they can’t even agree to what is good for the children. Come on! So, how can you expect the kids to learn? There are the few that are really interested. A lot of people now are just there for the money. Well, just another paycheck in the pocket.

Immediately subverting her framing of self-interested teachers as the problem, her husband Robert interjected to remind her: “Some of our friends are teachers.” Beverly echoed Mariam’s sentiment by stating: “I feel like the teachers are there for the money more than they are for the children. They’re not there for the kids.” Notably, she said this in reference to a Head Start teacher who left her daughter’s sweater and coat on all day despite rising temperatures because she was following program rules and feared administrative rebuke. Thus, while she echoed the dominant narrative of public teachers as self-interested, her story was actually about her frustration with the teacher’s sense of powerlessness in the school and how this adversely impacted her child.

Other critiques of public school teachers fully subverted the dominant narrative, instead framing the issue as that of systemic inequality. Nailah - who had a teaching certificate and recently pulled her children out of public school to attend her private school in her home - empathetically argued that school administrators seem to “need to justify their job” with top-down criteria and that this has led to public school teachers “becoming more like robots” adding “they have so much more to offer.” Similarly, Sandra described the public school her child attended as “fine,” explaining that the teachers are “doing a fairly good job” and that her daughter’s teacher is “doing the best she can with the whatever resources they’re giving her.” Michael characterized the young charter school teachers in his Bed Stuy neighborhood as “still enthusiastic and energetic” about teaching and not “scorned by…union issues and
things of that sort;” yet, he also sympathized with career public school teachers, stating: “After you've done something for so long and you see it as there being no really progression in pay, in anything, where is the joy?”

Finally, it is important to note that three parents in this sample held public school teaching certificates, yet each expressed private school preferences or made private and charter school choices. Yvonne taught at specialized public high school in Brooklyn before choosing to stay home to raise her children. While a community and education organizer by profession, her first child attended only private schools and she twice framed her choice to engage in public school choice as a financial decision that allowed her to stay home with her children. Moreover, Amina - a public middle school teacher in her 10th year - expressed a strong preference for private and charter schools and Nailah - who held early childhood education certification - chose to educate her youngest children in a private school that she recently opened in her home because of her concern about class size and teachers “becoming more like robots.” Additionally, as evidence to support their claim that public schools are failing, four other parents’ school choice stories referenced friends who are public school teachers yet chose to send their children to private or charter schools as an alternative to public schools. In this sense, parents seemed to be framing public school teachers who opt-out of public schools for their own children as proverbial canaries in the coalmine.

*Over-testing*

Continuing their critique of bureaucracy, five parents also expressed concerns about the negative effects of testing in public schools. Notably, each of these parents named testing as a reason for not enrolling or pulling at least one their children out of public schools. For
instance, identifying one of many reasons behind her decision to send her child to parochial
school, Patricia explained:

That’s the problem I have with public schools, is with that whole testing thing, where the curriculum is just all around the testing. They have to get ready for the testing, and I don’t believe the kids are learning anything, but memorizing what they’re being taught.

In addition, Margaret – whose youngest attends public school - described her positive experience with her son’s elite private middle school, explaining that it is “freed from the constraints of having to do, well, standardized testing,” sharing that when her son’s friends ask why he chose that private school, he replies: “no testing.” Daphne – who sent both her children to an elite independent school - distinguished between testing and her issue with how public schools “have to teach to the test” which “ties the hands of teachers” and “stresses the students out.” Nailah – a mother of eight children who all attended public schools and who ran the private school her youngest children attended - shared her concern that public schools are “over-testing our kids” and are “more concerned with kids passing a test than they are with them learning and enjoying, finding a love of learning.” Relatedly, she also mentioned that she had considered only one charter for her children because it was “less drill obsessed, less test [obsessed].”

Budget Cuts

Introducing a critique of neoliberalization to the mix, parents were also critical of budget cuts. Ten parents mentioned budget cuts as a factor shaping their aversion to neighborhood public schools, associating them with an absence of arts, extracurricular, afterschool, and
gym or recess programs that they valued and sought for their children by engaging in private and public school choice. Relatedly, four of these parents referred to concerns about overcrowded public school classrooms in relating their frustration with their public school or as the reason they took them out. Two parents associated public schools’ lack of resources as the source of public school failure and the related cause of charter school proliferation, success, and popularity. Empathizing with career public school teachers who have taught multiple generations in her neighborhood, Ebenita – who sent her children to public and charter schools - reasoned that no matter how strong the public school community and dedicated public school teachers are, “everybody is overworked and underpaid, and the resources just aren’t there.” She then juxtaposed her neighborhood school’s lack of resources with the “total different experience” in her charter school.

**Perspectives on Non-Dominant Cultural Capital**

School choice is intended to address parents’ concerns about their neighborhood public schools by allowing them freedom from zoning and the power to choose schools that will better serve their children. School choice allows parents the liberty to choose from a diverse marketplace of schools, some of which have used their autonomy to design innovative educational models for distinct cultural, special needs, gender, or religious groups (Minow, 2011). Some choice advocates posit that choice creates opportunities for schools to continue the legacy of community control and Black Power and Nationalist movements of the 1960s and 70s (Stulberg, 2008; 2004) and for parents to act on their preference for ethnocentric schooling as a form of “racial protectionism” (Mazama and Lundy, 2015; 2012, p. 12). Parents driven by this preference are assumed to reject or resist the premise that their
children need to assimilate to dominant White and middle-class culture and seek academic programs wherein students acquire “non-dominant cultural capital” in order to “gain ‘authentic’ status positions within their respective communities” and better “navigate the terrain of ethnic authenticity” (Carter, 2003, p. 138). This section challenges this contention by documenting the extent to which parents’ expressed preferences for public and private Afrocentric schooling and their critical position on schooling as non-dominant cultural acquisition.

Afrocentric Preferences

Efforts to improve the quality and outcomes of schooling for Black students have included the Black American development and governance of Afrocentric independent schools which share “an emphasis on the need for educational independence and self-reliance” originating in the 1960s and 70s Black Power movement and in demands for Afrocentric curricular reforms since the 1980s (Slaughter-Defoe, et.al, 2012, p. 11; Shujaa, 1994; Ginwright, 2004). Afrocentric schooling is presumed to remediate the cultural identity risks and damage Black students face in schools guided by dominant Eurocentric school culture wherein schools lack an understanding and appreciation of Black cultural capital and Black students are subjugated to discriminatory curriculum and tracking and discipline practices (Irvine, 1990).

Suggesting that charters predominately serving Black students are a public descendent of Black independent schools, some choice and charter advocates argue that such racial segregation created by charters is not necessarily problematic because “building African American identity, community, and legacy should be a central purpose of African American schooling” (Stulberg, 2008, p. 161). In the same vein, researchers have associated the failure
of public school reforms to address the racial achievement gap to increasing trends of African American private school enrollment and use of homeschooling (Slaughter-Defoe, et.al, 2012) and have framed Black homeschooling as an act of “racial protectionism” from Eurocentric curriculum, racist attitudes and behaviors of White teachers, the trend of Black children disproportionately targeted for special education and punishment (Mazama and Lundy, 2012, p. 12). NYC charters disproportionately serve Black students. Is this because parents perceive choice as a means to engage in Black cultural capital acquisition? The evidence gleaned from this sample reveal very few instances where parents expressed a preference for Black cultural capital acquisition through schooling and several instances where they reject this line of thinking entirely.

Only three parents explicitly mentioned a preference for Afrocentric curriculum or a school specifically designed to serve Black children. The first school Amina enrolled her oldest son in was an independent African American school. While she did not explain the reasons behind her preference for this school, her racial and cultural preference resurfaced when she explained that she applied to a parochial independent school for her second son because it was “predominantly African American.” Taking a more overtly political stance, Yvonne explained: “I was raised...my parents are Black Nationalist” and shared that she considered the same independent school for her second child, describing it as a school “for African American children...[with] an Afro-centric curriculum.” Moreover, she also shared a story about visiting a popular charter and appreciating it location inside the building of the “the first colored school founded for Black children” and that a teacher had “the Black Panther
Party platform on the wall” for Black history month, exclaiming “that’s some impressive shit...because it’s always Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Junior, Rosa Parks.”

Robert and Mariam’s shifting school preferences reveal a waning influence of Black Nationalism and Afrocentrism associated with shifting neighborhood demographics and globalization. Robert shared that they originally chose a neighborhood preschool that was “run very Afrocentric,” relating this to the fact that “there used to be a very strong Black Nationalist movement in Bed-Stuy in the 70’s called The East” when he was growing up. Revealing how his racial and cultural politics have changed over time, Robert initially framed their Afrocentric preschool school choice as nothing more than a preference for “convenience,” then added:

Yeah, pretty early on I used to president of the African Association, so there was a time I was really ...That was probably like the end of it. I was probably the last, you know. You realize the world is much larger.

His school choice stories revealed the mutability of his racial and cultural politics over time and in reaction to economic disparities in Bed-Stuy. For instance, he and his wife pulled their second child out of the same Afrocentric preschool due to her “timid nature” and what they perceived as negative shifts in faculty and parenting “as the economy changed.” From that point on, they sent all of their children to an independent Montessori school in relatively affluent and predominately White downtown Brooklyn. Importantly, he described the short period of time when they considered neighborhood and Afrocentric schools as a period when they were “still romantic,” suggesting that he perceived their choice of an Afrocentric
neighborhood school as naive or fanciful and their choice of the elite independent school as pragmatic and realistic.

Relatedly, two parents critiqued the concept schools designed to serve specific groups. Although all three of her children attend a charter school that she is very satisfied with, Ebenita spoke of the need for caution and her “mixed feelings” about charters without proven academic track records because:

there’s a new one popping up with a new theme, every year, or more. It’s like, “This school is for kids with red hair.” It’s really like, “Come here if you are six feet or taller.” It’s all these different themes, “We’re an art school,” ”We’re a techie school,” ”We’re a this,” ”We’re a that.” It just shows the need for it because all these schools are wait-listed, still as many schools are opening and then worried about them closing.

In this statement Ebenita framed preferences for charters serving different identity groups or with thematic foci as simplistic and the school models as somewhat absurd and insubstantial. Notably, she strategically avoided any mention of race or culture by mentioning red hair color and height as signifiers, which might have reflected her hesitancy speak of racial politics with a White researcher and/or an effort to voice her critique while avoiding denigrating such models.

Delphine – an immigrant from the Ivory Coast whose daughter attended a charter – took issue with Afrocentric politics in schools. She frequently argued that she did not think in terms of race before moving to the U.S. and shared stories about her efforts to protect her first-generation American daughter from being categorized as Black. Many of her stories about Brooklyn public schools suggested a frustration with Black American racial politics
and the type of dominant cultural capital she preferred for her daughter. For instance, she shared a story about being frustrated with an African American mother who complained about their charter’s curriculum during a school presentation. She recalled that the mother interrupted the dean, stating: “Well all that’s nice, but I would like also my child to know where she came from.” She framed this parent’s critique as “really ridiculous” then employed dominant narratives of public school crisis and the racial achievement gap to argue that the charter “is trying to give the best to your child compared to what they see when they say that out of 10 children, maybe 1 finish university.” In other words, she seemed to argue that the racial achievement crisis is too urgent, the stakes of underachievement too high, and the scarcity of quality schools to high to focus schooling on non-dominant capital acquisition.

She added: “like every month they celebrate the month of Black history month…so it’s not like they’re staying away from where the child comes from.” Returning to her preference for dominant cultural capital acquisition, she also critiqued Black American parents who want students to “speak Ebonic (sic)” in school, stating: “this is not what my child is at school for. I do not want my child to be categorized…there’s no way she will be categorized in a certain part that jeopardize her expansion in life.” Making a case against schooling as a process of “categorization” she revealed her assumption that attending an all Black school in a predominately Black neighborhood has the potential to cause her first-generation immigrant daughter to become culturally Blacker, thus risk losing societal status in a racially stratified society. She also revealed her preference for a color-blind curriculum divorced from racial
politics that will serve to prepare her child for success in college and buttress her mobility in a racially stratified society.

The cultural anxieties and related curricular preferences Delphine expressed are akin to what Philip Kasinitz (1992) has described as West Indian immigrants' “dilemma” of experiencing “upward economic mobility” through accessing a more prosperous economy while simultaneously “paying the price of downward mobility in status” by being racially categorized as Black Americans, “America’s most consistently oppressed minority group” (p. 33). In Delphine’s case, it is clear that she perceived Afrocentric curricular reform as a threat to the upward social mobility she hoped to maintain for her first-generation immigrant daughter through acquisition of dominant cultural capital in school. Importantly, Delphine was also frustrated by this request for non-dominant African American history because she perceived it as hierarchically superseding her non-dominant African immigrant culture. For instance, she explained that she hadn’t “yet read anything or hear anything from [my daughter] coming from school from Africa” and that she had observed that when children in other schools learn about her homeland, “the Africa they give to the child is a poor Africa,” retorting “sorry, Africa is very far away to be poor (sic).” In addition, one of her complaints about the charter’s curriculum was that it did not support the acquisition of the French language, thus her daughter was quickly losing her mother tongue and increasingly demanding that she speak English. This suggests that Delphine may have had a different perspective had her African immigrant culture been the non-dominant culture in question.

Parents who critiqued schools with the mission of non-dominant cultural capital acquisition preferred schools that would help their children acquire dominant cultural capital, assuming
that it would pave the way for their children’s social and economic mobility. Parents’ academic preferences were shaped by an awareness that their children will eventually need to compete for work in an increasingly competitive and global society and job market and the choices they made were guided by their intention to help their children acquire the status and dominant knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to attain social and economic mobility in this context.

**Choice as a Class Divergent Pursuit of Dominant Cultural Capital**

Everyone’s trying to give their child a competitive edge because things are so global now. You are competing against kindergarteners around the world. It is ridiculous. It’s not just play time and nap time any more, it’s so much more than that. I think parents recognize that the start … The schools that you go to for kindergarten, dictate junior high schools, dictate high schools, dictate college. The choice is no longer in your sophomore year, what college would you like to go to. No, you better be on the track from now.

- Ebenita, mother of three children enrolled in a charter

There’s a tremendous amount of class stratification within the African-American community. It’s tremendous. Just like anybody else, no better, no worse.

- Robert, father of four children enrolled in an independent Montessori school

Standardized test scores most commonly measure educational progress and disparities. The federal government compares U.S. standardized test scores with those of other countries to substantiate the dominant narrative of public school crisis and failure, framing public school reform as an urgent solution to our country’s need to remain globally competitive or dominant. Standardized test scores are also used to expose racial educational inequality, with decades of data documenting a persistent racial achievement gap, or disparities in the test performance (and high school and college completion rates) between White students and students of color with gaps largest in areas with large economic disparities such as NYC
(Cox and Rich, 2016). In efforts to bolster global competition and address the racial achievement gap, a key characteristic of post-Brown educational policy was the politically conservative reframing of racial educational equity in NCLB as the pursuit of “academic excellence” through higher standards, testing outputs, and accountability measures that emphasize expanding school choice so that families can access higher-performing schools (Scott, 2011; Andre-Bechely, 2005). While researchers continue to debate the discourse or causes of the public school crisis and racial achievement gap, an array of education reforms that have attempted to address these issues. Two that are pertinent to this study are progressive public school reforms and the “no excuses” model predominately found in charters serving students of color.

The assumption undergirding progressive school reform is that students’ academic performance will be enhanced by participation in experiential and interactive school environments where curriculum and pedagogy is humanist and child-centered. The origins of progressive school philosophy extend back to the beginning of the 20th century in NYC, with its greatest influence realized through progressive alternative schools of the 1960s and small urban schools in the 1980s (Semel and Sadovnik, 2008). Since then, progressive philosophies of schooling have become common in some schools of education and school systems, with NYCDOE adopting the progressive Balanced Literacy and Everyday Mathematics as a citywide uniform curriculum for public schools (traub, 2003). Primarily middle-class parents preferred the progressive educational model for their children, believing that it would best prepare them for success in college and an increasingly globalized society and job market.
While popular, progressive education is not without controversy. Since its introduction, advocates of “traditionalism” have struggled to regain influence, leading to heated public conflicts such as the 1990s “reading wars” between proponents of phonics and whole language instruction (ibid; Reyhner, 2008). Speaking to the racial politics of curriculum and instruction, Lisa Delpit (1995) argued that the progressive education movement is dominated by White liberals and that the model has been both patronizing and damaging to the students and teachers of color that it has been imposed upon. As a progressively trained Black teacher Delpit (1995) found that the progressive literacy instruction she used in a racially mixed classroom benefitted her White students far more than her Black students. As a result, she embraced the less popular “traditional” approach of directly teaching skills to students that the few other Black teachers in the school used and found that her Black students made progress with this approach (ibid, p. 14). Critiquing progressive education from her standpoint as a Black teacher and researcher focused on racial educational equity, Delpit argues that the progressive movement needs to be more inclusive and responsive to teachers and students of color and that progressive instruction for students of color must involve the direct teaching of “technical skills” in addition to the “ability to think critically and creatively” (1995, p. 19).

A partial extension of this critique and call for technical skill training for students of color, many urban charters predominately serving students of color have implemented a “no excuses” educational model characterized by a rejection of progressive schooling and the implementation of “truly radical educational innovations” such as back-to-basics curricula, authoritative pedagogy, hiring non-union teachers who work extended school schedules, and
strict disciplinary policies including parent contracts (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 43). The phrase “no excuses” is a discourse used to chastise public school systems that are perceived as using concentrated poverty and “dysfunctional families” as excuses for “widespread, chronic educational failure” instead of embracing the systemic reforms charters have used to “do splendidly on state assessments” (ibid, p. 43, 49). With two exceptions, primarily low-income parents who participated in this study preferred this educational model for their children because they believed that it would best prepare them for success in college and an increasingly globalized society and job market. Notably, middle-class parents who rejected this educational model for their own children believed that it was appropriate dominant cultural capital training for low-income children.

The sense of urgency in Ebenita's statement about elementary school choice that introduced this section is shared across parents’ general internalization of dominant narratives of the public school crisis and the purpose of schooling as college preparedness and success in a globalized society and job market. However, parents’ socioeconomic positions shaped the way they perceived different educational models and their ability to imbue their own and their neighbors’ children with the dominant cultural capital necessary to attain these goals. This section will compare and contrast parents’ class-based preferences for “no excuses” charters and progressive independent and public schools and end with an analysis of their shared preference for student body diversity which they conceptualized as a means to acquisition of dominant cultural capital.

“No Excuses” Charters
Before proceeding, it is important to note - as three parents did in their interviews – that, just as not all public schools are the same, not all charters are the same. While other types of charters do exist in NYC, the twelve parents who enrolled their children in a charter at some point in at least one child’s elementary years all chose charters that employ a “no excuses” educational model. This section has the goal of understanding how parents conceptualized “no excuses” charters as sites of dominant cultural capital acquisition. Further, it compares and contrasts the perceptions of enthusiastic parents with children enrolled in charters at the time of the interview with those of the shifting preferences of parents who enrolled their children in charters at some point, but decided to pull them out and seek alternatives. The former group of parents speaks to the mutability of parents’ preferences and shifting choices over time, a core finding of this study.

Primarily low-income parents’ charter perspectives and choices are conceptualized as examples of “subaltern agency,” or the tactful and rational development of school-level preferences and school choices (Pedroni, 2007). This is particularly evident in parents’ recognition of and internal struggle with the benefits and detriments of such “radical” school-level innovations as extended school days and years. These parents came to the interviews aware of the fact that “no excuses” charters were controversial, and their interviews commonly involved identifying the school-level characteristics they appreciated in contrast to neighborhood public schools while also acknowledging the debate about “no excuses” charters within their schools and neighborhoods and registering their own concerns. In other words, even the most enthusiastic parents were aware of controversies and named
unfavorable aspects of the model, yet perceived “no excuses” charters as their best possible option.

**Table 12. Parents who enrolled children in charters**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolled in charters at time of interview</th>
<th>Pulled children out of charters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amina,</td>
<td>Amber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>Cynthia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delphine</td>
<td>Margaret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebenita</td>
<td>Yvonne</td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Michellene</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: Data from interviews

The objective of academic programming provided by “no excuses” charters is mastery of fundamental basic academic skills and knowledge paired with high standards and expectations for academic success, regardless of student background or neighborhood, in order to strengthen performance on standardized tests (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004). This emphasis on test preparation is especially important in a city like NYC where standardized test scores partially determine students’ degree of access to quality middle and high schools later on. Predating the Common Core’s focus on college and career readiness, a key element of “no excuses” charters is an emphasis on college preparation and an expectation of college enrollment and success, even in the elementary years. Parents with children enrolled in charters at the time of the interview viewed charters as critical sites of dominant cultural capital acquisition and the choice of charters as the pursuit of academic excellence, speaking highly of their charters’ high academic standards and expectations.
Parents’ positive appraisals of the charters’ academic training and expectations reveals their conceptualization of the type of dominant cultural capital their children need to successfully compete in an increasingly competitive globalized society and job market.

Delphine – whose daughter was in 1st grade in an all-girls “no excuses” charter - shared that the charter her child attended was teaching her “how to talk like an actress,” explaining that she appreciated this because “it’s mostly like to prepare her to be ready for the world,” not her “little corner...area” of the neighborhood where children use “the vocabulary of the street.” Similar to her critique of schools teaching Black history and culture, she appreciated that the school was preparing her daughter to successfully exit the neighborhood and navigate other, more dominant cultures. She described the charter’s curriculum as “A+” and later explained that the charter’s “objective is to prepare them since the beginning for university” with the example that “all of the classes are called after a university name.” Finally, she shared that she appreciated the “enrichments” that the charter offered, like music and art history where the school is “realistic” in preparing students “for the future” by training musicians and art historians who learn about famous European painters like Gauguin. Overall, Delphine perceived the academic training her daughter was receiving in her charter as a mechanism of distinction through the acquisition of dominant Eurocentric modes of communication and knowledge.

Unlike Delphine, Ebenita had three children and had had frustrated experiences with a Gifted & Talented program and her neighborhood public school before being selected by a “no excuses” charter. From this perspective, Ebenita spoke highly of the academic training her three children were exposed to in their charter. She explained that the staff “really raise the
bar and stick to that and it really allows the children to rise to the occasion” because “their expectations prove their confidence that the children can actually...reach for this and go beyond.” Relatedly, she stated that “even their basic core standards are higher than public school standards” and that “there is really not any room for social promotion.” As evidence of the charter’s higher standards and expectations, she shared that her daughter had passed the G&T test that same year, yet had tested a grade level behind on the charter’s test and required remediation over the summer. She also distinguished their charter as being among the ranks of “other higher standards charter schools,” explaining that she applied because it “had a track record as a network of charter schools, and it had success,” meaning strong test scores and college acceptance/graduation rates. Like Delphine she also appreciated that the charter had arts, dance, and voice programming on a daily basis “to make it fun,” unlike public schools with limited budgets. Speaking to concerns about budget cuts in traditional public schools, parents across the sample expressed a strong preference for humanities and extracurricular programming, which they were able to access through charter school choice. Other parents with children enrolled in charters also associated them with enhanced academic achievement as measured by standardized tests and college preparedness. Beverly described the curriculum of the charter her niece attended as “college bound” with the objective of “keep[ing] the kids focused on finishing grade school, finishing high school, and entering and college.” Michellene explained that charter schools are attractive options because “from the beginning, they start thinking about college.” In fact, low-income parents so strongly associated this focus on college preparation with charters that John—a father of multiple children who attended both public and charters—misrecognized his daughter’s
public middle school as a charter school because her classroom was named after Syracuse University and the school staff addressed graduating students at a graduation ceremony “like college students.” Echoing Ebenita’s preference for a school with proven track record of academic success, Michael – a middle-class outlier in this group whose son attended kindergarten in a charter - described first learning about charters through an article in a magazine about Black businesses that celebrated how well charters “were performing...on the state and city tests as opposed to ... in comparison to other public schools, and knocking them out the box.” He then explained: “At the end of the day, results ... That’s what I’m concerned about when I think about my child’s education is positive results.”

Parents also associated charters with the interrelated characteristics of harder working and more dedicated teachers, longer school days, and strict discipline. Unlike public schools that employ unionized teachers, NYS charters have autonomy to hire and fire non-union teachers without labor protections who are able to work longer days and years as a result. Parents noted the difference between charter and neighborhood public school teachers and associated charter teachers’ longer days and years with youth and related characteristics of enthusiasm, energy, dedication, and availability. Michael described the teachers who work at his son’s charter as “young,” contrasting them with public school teachers in that they seemed “still enthusiastic and energetic about learning, about being able to teach” with the “open-mindedness and enthusiasm of a child to come into the field and make a difference.” As evidence, he explained that his family is often in the charter until 5:30 or 8pm and that teachers are still working, which he believes speaks to “the dedication and amount of time that they’re actually putting into that school.” Michellene shared this perception, asserting
that “charter school teachers never finish working” and that “they put themselves to work, and they assure you that they really want it to work,” adding that she has all of her son’s teachers’ cell phone numbers.

Relatedly, “no excuses” charters use their autonomy to establish extended school schedules where the long days are “organized for nonstop learning” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 55). Some parents with children in charter schools referred to their preference for extended academic schedules, with two speaking of long schools days and Saturday programming as an appreciated means of keeping their children academically engaged for extended periods of time. Two others perceived this as an accommodation for parents who need and want the convenience of a school schedule aligned with their work schedule. Nailah – who ran a progressive private school out of her home - told a story about a neighborhood child who attended a charter school from 7:30am to 4:45pm, a school schedule which she equated with a “full-time work schedule for an adult.” Speaking to the tradeoffs of this schedule, she described the child as doing very well academically but also being “very exhausted.” While not a proponent of charters, she conceded that some charter students are doing “tremendously better” as a result of extended schedules and the instructional strategy of “drilling” basic skills and information.

Like Nailah, parents with children enrolled in charters expressed concerns about the extended academic schedule. For example, Delphine was concerned that her kindergartener was given too much homework after very long school days, worrying that it will cause her to lose the “taste of wanting to learn more.” Beyond concern for children’s well-being, Beverly expressed a critical perception of the extended schedules as follows:
I just feel like they just want to kidnap your kid for the day. I feel like the reason why they're doing that is because they feel that the parents don't know how to take care of their kids. They want the kid in their environment for most of the day to keep the kids' mind on their level of thinking, because then, when they go home to their mom, and their mom is on some other stuff, it throws the kid off. It's like null and void, everything you did all day.

In other words, Beverly seemed to be insulted by what she perceived as charters' use of extended schedules to nullify the influence of culturally subordinate or inferior home culture. Despite taking insult, she kept her niece in charters because she still perceived them as a better option than the neighborhood schools. Other parents echoed a similar concern about cultural deficit assumptions in their critiques of “no excuses” charter disciplinary policies that follow.

Serving as an alternative to parents' concerns about neighborhood public schools lacking structure, discipline, and good parenting, “no excuses” charters also use their autonomy to employ “zero-tolerance” discipline policies characterized by strict student behavior codes and parent-contracts with the objective of establishing “order” in the school and classrooms (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 57). In the most basic sense of school structure and discipline, parents across the sample expressed a strong preference for school uniforms, a common policy in NYC parochial, charter, and public schools. Beyond uniform requirements, “no excuses” charters share a more controversial objective of instilling students with “manners and civility...disciplined work habits...[and] a sense of personal responsibility for their own future” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004, p. 64). In other words, “no excuses” disciplinary practices are focused on instilling dominant cultural dispositions and values and premised on assumptions that students and families are deficient in this regard. Some
charter parents expressed appreciation for their charters’ explicit effort to train students in what they perceived as dominant cultural disposition and values, but always contrasted them with what they perceived and experienced as the lack of discipline and structure in their neighborhood and its public schools.

Michellene acknowledged that other children have told her that her son’s charter is “too strict for them,” but countered that the charter has taught her son how to comport himself. She explained that her son got off the bus at his old public school and started “running, running through the school,” whereas his charter “teachers are hired to greet the kids in the morning” so children “cannot run...have to shake hands with everybody...make eye contact and fix their ties and everything.” She also described the charter as a place where “everybody hands is at work (sic)” and his classroom as a place where “everybody eyes on everybody, so they’re all learning, and nobody has time to play around (sic).” Amina – a public middle school teacher who sent her children to out-of-zone public, parochial, and charter schools – also contrasted the structure and discipline of charters with public schools, explaining: “parents are looking for an alternative to the idea that public schools are so volatile...and not preparing students to cope with their emotions.” She described charters as a place where students are focused on academics, unlike public schools where she perceived students as focused on “how to fight...how to talk back...how to protect yourself (sic).”

Delphine fondly described her daughter’s all-girl charter as “very strict” with “no recession time” where even if they “have a little break...either they’re on the computer, nothing that will take the child interests as far as academics, they’re learning.” She also told a story about a child who had benefited from the structure and discipline of another charter, citing “his
posture, his way to walk, you can recognize that he’s a gentleman,” adding that “you don’t see that much in this street here [Brownsville]” and “that’s what I want to give my child.” In contrast, she told a story about a neighbor who pulled her son out of a charter because the school was “too strict,” with policies like making children walk with hands in their pockets. Delphine argued that “he lost a lot of posture” as a result of leaving the charter and attending a public school. Ebenita also fondly described the charter her three children attended as “very, very structured” with 20-minute lunch breaks and a 15-minute recesses, with the caveat that it’s “not so cold it’s like a military regimented type of thing.” She explained that the result of this “wonderful” structure is that “kids know what to expect” and are “on point,” describing seamless and efficient transitions to and from lunch, carpet time, or dismissals.

Another unique aspect of “no excuses” charters is disciplinary policies for parents that are often established with a parent-contract. As part of their agreement with schools, “no excuses” charters require parents to follow and support charter policies and to take personal responsibility for their children’s learning and behavior. After describing the schedule of her charter’s mandated summer academy as “a bit inconvenient,” Ebenita voiced her appreciation for the charter being “very clear on their standards and their expectations,” explaining that all parents sign a contract and you know that this is what you’re expected to do.” She described the parent contract as a “formal commitment to each student,” believing it demonstrated that the charter had “the best interest at heart in the child” and it concretized clear and fair expectations of “the commitment that it’s going to take on both ends.” In relation, she fondly described school communication as “non-stop, always,” explaining that she reviewed her children’s behavioral charts everyday and spoke with them about her
children's issues and accomplishments "so often it's insane." She also shared a story about her appreciation for the school's policy of keeping students after school when homework is incomplete, causing them to miss the bus and inconveniencing parents who have to pick them up. Regarding this policy, she stated:

I love the way the school works. Yes, your parent has to get involved. You're not just going to keep slacking off and the school is going to pick up the work. It's going to affect your life as a parent, and they're going to have you involved.

Other parents had similar experiences and positive perspectives, with Michael asserting that he is happy to comply with the policy of checking his son's behavioral log every day because he wants to know how his son behaves on a daily basis and Michellene juxtaposing the "non-stop calling" of her son's charter about a parent meeting with the public school that will "call you once and that's it."

In contrast, other parents also told stories of pulling their children out of charters precisely because of their disciplinary policies. Cynthia – whose special needs son attended zoned, out-of-zoned, charter, and private schools - remembered wanting her son to go to a charter because "it was new and they had everything" then realizing "this is not fun" and thinking that "it almost felt like I was in prison" because the staff seemed to be conveying the message that: "you're only gonna do what we allow you to do. If you try to take a step further, you're a problem for us (sic).” Amber – whose children attended zoned and out-of-zone public and charter schools - told a story about a charter punishing her 3rd grade son by making him serve him in-house suspension in the back of a middle school classroom, stating: "You might as well sit them on the curb. He would have gotten more attention sitting at the gas station.”
In contrast to Ebenita and Michellene who appreciated the “insane” extent of calls, she complained that the staff called her constantly with “stupid stuff” like the fact that her son would not sit properly, to the extent that she felt that the school was conspiring against her because she was causing trouble by advocating for her son. Remarkably, Amber’s son was suspended twelve times during this 3rd grade school year and she attributed her decision to leave her job to her need to constantly advocate for him. Sadly, this high rate of suspension is not an isolated phenomenon. NYC charters suspended students at nearly three times the rate (11%) of public schools (4.2%) during the 2011-2012 school year, and these numbers do not even include a count of in-school suspensions (Decker, et.al, 2015).

Even when parents with children in charters appreciated the rigid structure and strict discipline, they were aware that these policies were not without controversy. Ebenita framed the debate about “no excuses” charter discipline as a cultural divide, explaining that West Indian and African parents “seem to complain a bit more” about “the standards of the charter schools.” Referencing other parents’ complaints about the charter throughout her interview, she shared that they were critical of students only getting “maybe a 15 minute recess” and of the charter’s “behavior standards, and how they call you for every little thing.” Further, she explained: “It was literally down to a lot of sucking teeth, when they saw that there’s a group bathroom time,” sharing that she overheard them saying: “‘this is too much, they’re just kids,’ and so forth and so on.” She also paraphrased a parent’s negative online review of the charter as: “This school is great for academics, but…the kids wont’ be well rounded.”

For every “foreign Black” parent complaint, she shared a retort. Responding to complaints about the school being too “hard” she argued: “this is a school, that is what they are supposed
to be here for.” She juxtaposed her theory of parenting and parent-school relationships with immigrant parents, explaining:

The school is not the end all be all of the child's rearing. I don't know if it's an expectation of coming to America and you send your child to school and they raise them. For me, school is really just for academic. Anything else that comes, friendship, bond, that's all wonderful, the whole socialization thing, but my kids are involved in enough other activities and other things that I know that they will be well rounded, as opposed to me looking for the school to give them that. It might just be an expectation of what schools are supposed to offer. And I'm completely grateful with just the high level of academics and the high level of behavioral standards.

In this statement Ebenita appears to be projecting an assumption of cultural deficit on immigrant parents, suggesting that the real problem lies in these parents being far too dependent on the school for their children’s development and that they need to engage their children in activities at home that would make their children “well rounded” instead of criticizing the charter. In contrast, she seems to be insinuating that she raises in accordance to the academic and behavioral standards of the charter. Responding to other parents’ complaints about “behavior standards” and about being called “for every little thing,” she states:

I want to know what's going on and a lot of parents don't. Again, I think it's the expectation, 'Just let the school deal with it. They're there with you, you deal with it.' I don't have that kind of approach to ... my child is my child, wherever they are, and ultimately the responsibility is on me, not necessarily on the school. It's not on the school to fix their behavior problems. It's not on the school to have to deal with that, particularly alone. Again, I think it's just the expectation of what a school is, what it represents, and what their responsibilities are.
In other words, Ebenita suggested that instead of complaining about the frequency of calls that even she described as “insane,” parents should take personal responsibility for their children’s behavior.

Finally, she exemplified the concept of “subaltern agency” by first arguing these parents chose the charter and have the power to leave, then immediately acknowledging that leaving is not a genuine solution for parents because “they don’t have any other choice because of where they live; otherwise we would be putting a child in a school where academically that won’t be as good.” Trading off school-level preferences for what parents perceive as charters’ track record of academic excellence is a theme that runs across parents’ stories about charters. Ebenita recognizes their tradeoff because she had only chosen this charter after years of negative experiences in various public schools and with public school choice herself.

Other parents referred to this tradeoff in reference to a charter network that came under fire in the press the year interviews were conducted. The middle school in this charter network deducted points from students for behavior infractions, and students with zero or less points by the end of the week were subjected to five days of detention and designated “out of the brotherhood,” meaning they ate breakfast and lunch in a separate room and had to wear a different shirt than their peers (Tanner and Murphy, 2013). In addition, during the 2012-2013 school year this charter suspended 40 percent of its students, constituting the second highest suspension rate among NYC charters (Decker, Snyder, Darville, 2015). Concerned parents went to news outlets to critique the charter network’s behavioral system as “discriminatory and treating students like prisoners” (Tanner and Murphy, 2013). In
response, the middle school leader explained that the mission of the school is college preparation and their disciplinary approach was necessary to help male students of color “get back on track and focus on learning” (ibid).

Media coverage and subsequent conversations with neighbors and family members about this controversy factored heavily in some parents’ interviews. Michael – an outlier middle-class parent whose son attended kindergarten in the elementary charter of this network – mentioned this “bad press” five times, framing parents’ decision to speak to the press instead of working with teachers as “pretty extreme.” Disagreeing with their critique of the charter’s disciplinary policies, he argued there actually was a need for this level of discipline in the Bed Stuy neighborhood where the charter was located, reasoning:

...in this neighborhood, actually, we need that type of discipline. There are more mothers that drop off and pick up their kid, their boys, at [my charter] than there are fathers...That's a very, very huge void that's being filled. I'm not saying that women don’t discipline their sons. I'm not saying that. All of the women that are dropping off their sons don’t have fathers in their life. It's just an observation.... It's a really great mission. It's been pretty successful....

Importantly, Michael also made the case that the charter’s structure and discipline benefitted his kindergartner who comes from a middle-class, two-parent Bed Stuy household, stating:

I feel like him having this foundation and this discipline early on ... It sets a foundation for him later. It lets him know that school is something that he has to take serious. It’s something that he has to be disciplined about, and he has to focus.

However, while he supported the charter’s policies, the fact that he mentioned the controversy five times during his interview suggests that he may have been torn or
concerned about the disciplinary practices. Further, his emphasis on “later” in the statement above is potentially related to his plan to leave NYC because of the schools, suggesting that he may have perceived his son’s time in the school as “foundational” and temporary because his family’s middle-class capital afforded them with an escape plan from both the school and NYC.

Mariam—a middle-class parent who sent her children to a progressive independent school—referenced hearing about the controversy in the news. She was concerned about the rigid structure and strict discipline of the “no excuses” charter school network, stating her progressive belief that “school should be an environment where kids should be able to explore themselves and learn, not feel like they’re prisoners basically.” Worried about the effect that the charter network's model of “discipline, discipline, discipline, and no love” will have on Black children as adults, she asked: “Why should kids endure that to be successful?” She also sympathized with parents who, unlike her family, saw the charter as “their only safe haven” and believed that their children belonged there because they needed that level of discipline.

In retort, her husband Robert—who grew up in Bed Stuy—asserted that the disciplinary model “is probably good for a certain population and for parents that want that.” He echoed Michael’s belief that low-income children in Bed Stuy needed this kind of disciplinary training because some children are “basically raising themselves, or they’re being raised by a television or the streets” or being raised in a shelter with “parents [who] are completely dysfunctional or out of it.” He also shared a story about one of their friends whose son had benefitted more from the charter’s structure than the progressive structure of their
independent school. Disagreeing with this wife, he argued that the real issue was the lack of quality public choices for middle-class parents like themselves who wanted a different type of academic training for their children.

Many middle-class parents shared Robert’s perception of the “no excuses” model as beneficial for low-income children, just not their own. Margaret’s story about her son’s initial experience with the same charter exemplifies tensions created by the “no excuses” model. Her son attended the charter from kindergarten through 3rd grade when she pulled him out in the middle of the school year because he was very unhappy. She explained that she was initially drawn to the school’s “stated curriculum,” juxtaposing this with public schools where “it’s constant flux about the curriculum.” Further, as mentioned earlier, she also reflexively explained that the dominant narrative about the Black achievement gap had compelled her to choose a “no excuses” charter for her Black son, regardless of the fact that he came from a two-parent, middle-class household with highly-educated, professional parents.

Margaret’s shifting school level preferences and experiences with his charter exemplify the tensions created by the “no excuses” model. Another middle-class outlier in this group of parents who pulled her son out in 3rd grade, she described the charter in question as a “back-to-basics style charter” that was “teacher-directed, data-driven. She explained that her academically “exceptional” son “hit the ceiling with their tests” and argued that he was not the school’s “target audience” because “they have no plan for kids who demonstrate no achievement gap.” Not without appreciation for the school, she also described the charter as a “beautiful and efficient” school with “very dedicated” staff that provided a much better education than neighborhood public schools, arguing that most of her issues with the charter
stemmed from external pressures created by standardized tests. However, Margaret later referred to the charter’s “no excuses” disciplinary policies as not “right for my child’s health and development.” As evidence, she shared a story about her son getting lost in the building in 3rd grade because he did not know how to independently navigate the school. She also spoke of a phenomenon she coined “post traumatic charter school syndrome,” sharing stories about her son using hand symbols to go to the bathroom after leaving the charter and other children from different charters also “seeking permission for every move” and suffering from bladder control issues. Disturbingly, she shared that, even after years away from the charter, her son would “dream that all the boys were lined up and whoever moved first was going to get shot” and that her son had reflexively said to her: "I see. They were training us just like dogs, with punishments and rewards."

In addition, she took issue with the charter-parent relationship that she described as “the orphanage model” wherein parents are merely expected to “uphold their policies and oversee the two hours plus of homework” as per the contract that “sever[s] your parental rights to some certain degree.” Just as her son was not the charter’s “target audience,” she believed that her “profile” did also did not fit the model, citing an example of the charter using a “robo-dialer” to call parents at 5:45 a.m. the day after their child was late to school. She recalled complaining about this practice, telling school staff: “I know if I lived on the Upper West Side, you wouldn’t be calling me at 5:45 in the morning” and described the policy as: “designed for people who interact with bureaucracies like the welfare office. That is not me. I don’t get calls at 5:45 in the morning unless somebody has died.” In other words, she perceived this practice of disciplining parents as intended for low-income parents and was
perturbed that the same rules applied to middle-class parents like her. She then made the case that “nothing there was personal” and “everything was very neutral,” describing the treatment families received from the school regardless of class or education as “equitable,” regardless of class, followed by a tongue-in-cheek distinction of “equal opportunity disempowerment.”

Other parents were also offended by what they perceived as cultural deficit assumptions undergirding “no excuses” charters’ practices and policies. Yvonne – whose children attended private, charter, and out-of-zone public schools – described going to an open house for the same charter and hearing “a lot of talk about academic rigor and discipline and discipline and discipline and discipline.” Describing her decision not to enter her child into this charter’s lottery, she remembered saying to one of the school leaders:

I’m not hearing milk and cookies here, and he’s four. So I would need to hear milk and cookies, because discipline he’s coming with. I’m sending him to you with discipline. So he doesn’t need that. Where’s the milk and cookies?

Unlike Ebenita who was nonplussed by her charter’s disciplinary practices because she believed that her parenting was aligned with the expectations of the charter, Yvonne was similar to other parents in feeling the need to remind school leaders that her family was not culturally deficient and in her concern that the school did not seem like a caring or nurturing environment for small children. Yvonne also took chagrin with charters’ common practice of naming classrooms after colleges, asserting: “My kids don’t need to go to a school where they have college banners hanging from the wall, because that’s an expectation... that’s a given.”
Again, in stating this, she seems to be voicing a frustration with charters for assuming cultural deficit of her family.

Beverly –whose niece attended kindergarten in a charter - spoke of feeling “upset” by the requirement of signing a parent contract, describing her reaction as:

I felt like I was being schooled. I’m the parent. I’m here to have my kid educated. I don’t need you to tell me how to take care of my kid. That’s the biggest problem I have with charter schools, because, like I said, that’s why they hold on to your kids for all those hours. They want your kid to be at their mindset, and they don’t want your kid to have your influence. They feel like your influence is a negative one. That’s the problem with the charter schools, because the parents are not the problem. Sometimes they are, but we have to deal with all the other issues that we talk about.

Importantly, despite Beverly’s critique of the hurtful cultural deficit assumptions undergirding the long school days and parent contract, she expressed no intentions of pulling her niece out of the charter, suggesting that she saw no other viable alternative. While Margaret and Beverly had enrolled their children in this charter network and Yvonne had not, all three were frustrated by the cultural deficit assumptions that were inherent to the “no excuses” charter model and were frustrated that charter leaders assumed that they were not good parents who fostered strong home environments.

Notably, Chapter 4 demonstrated that these same parents also spoke of using choice to avoid what they perceived as poor parenting in neighborhood public schools and as a means to joining higher status social networks where parents have more capital. Parents who critiqued charters for their assumption of cultural deficit did not do so because it was racist or unjust; instead, they were offended that charters generalized this assumption of cultural
deficit across all Black families, including their own. In fact, some middle-class parents like Robert made the case that low-income children benefitted from the “no excuses” charter model, and parents deserved to have that option, but their children needed a different progressive educational model that was in scarce supply in their neighborhoods. This sense of progressive scarcity is a significant theme across stories of middle-class parents who rejected charters as an option, preferring and choosing progressive independent and public schools as critical sites for dominant cultural capital acquisition.

*Progressive Schools*

With few exceptions, middle-class parents tended to prefer progressive schools for their own children. Like charter school parents, middle-class parents developed preferences in dialectical relation to neighborhood public schools and “no excuses” charters, perceiving their preferred model as a means to dominant cultural capital acquisition with the end goal of college and career preparation in an increasingly competitive globalized economy and society. Unlike charter parents who expressed preferences for academic excellence as demonstrated by test scores, middle-class parents expressing a desire for non-authoritative and ungraded school environments with far less emphasis on testing that develop a love of learning and the global cultural knowledge, languages, dispositions, and values that will prepare them for success in this context. Unlike “no excuses” charters, these private and public progressive schools were predominately located in relatively affluent and White neighborhoods.

*Progressive Independent Schools*
Every parent who chose independent schools at least considered public options and charters for their children at some point in the elementary choice process before eventually choosing progressive educational models that significantly diverge from the “no excuses” model. Like parents with children in charters, these progressive preferences were in dialectical relation to what they observed and/or experienced in public and charter schools.

Table 13. Parents who enrolled children in independent progressive schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolled children in independent schools</th>
<th>School philosophy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
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<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Free school</td>
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<td>Nailah</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robert and Mariam</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Special Needs</td>
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Note: Data from interviews

Robert and Mariam – whose children only attended an independent Montessori school – started their search with public and charter schools. They told a story about attending an open house for a neighborhood charter where students spend half of the year on a farm outside of the city. While drawn to this innovative model, they were “turned off by the [poor] turnout” at the meeting and repelled by the school director continually “stressing how the home environment is not conducive to learning, how we need to get the kids out of their environment.” Reflecting on that experience, Robert’s imagined response to the charter leader was:

I just came from spending the day with my kids at the Metropolitan Museum... What are you going to offer middle-class people? Yes, I understand there’s a population like that in Bed-Stuy that needs to be served, that does need that
exposure and to see. But what are you going to offer my kids, who don’t necessarily have those same needs?

Robert was insulted by the charter leader’s assumption of universal cultural deficit across all Black families regardless of class or education. Like other parents who interacted with charter schools, he was offended that the charter leader generalized cultural deficit across all neighborhood parents, again making the case that those educational models are for low-income, culturally deficit, families and there is a scarcity of progressive options for middle-class parents in his neighborhood. Frustrated by this experience and being wait-listed at an out-of-zone public school, he and his wife enrolled their four children in an independent Montessori school located in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood where they were very satisfied.

Robert and Mariam’s school choice stories mainly centered on their aversion to Bed Stuy and desire to accrue social capital through choosing the independent school where their downtown Brooklyn friends sent their children; however, they did make limited references to the type of academic training they wanted for their children. For instance, Robert explained: “We want our kids to have an experiential education.” Just as parents rationalized their aversion to public schools by referring to public school teachers who do not choose public schools, Robert rationalized his private choice by referring to other upper middle-class parents’ progressive preferences. He argued that, unlike low-income parents whose preferences are shaped by concerns about the racial achievement gap, upper middle-class parents like them “just want their kids to have a love for learning, to experiment...and explore” because “they’re not worried about what college their kids are going to get
into...about their kids having to necessarily find a job.” Further, he argued that this class-based preference for progressive schooling is prevalent throughout the Black middle- and upper-class, stating:

The fact of the matter is, Black folks with money ... Reverend Sharpton sent his kids to Poly Prep. Okay? “Mr. ‘Grass Roots’.” All of these so-called “grass roots”...Jesse Jackson, our president Obama, even before he was president...All these liberals or whatever, look at where they send their kids. They talk a good game. I’m not hating on them, but, you know. Just see what people are saying, people can say. Just look at what they do with their children.

Daphne sent her children to the “local” Montessori nursery and preschool, and perceived this as creating a social network for her children composed of other progressively educated and parented children. Further, she described her children’s school as “very child-focused” with a philosophy of “education for its own sake” where they “encourage students to understand and develop their minds independently” thorough “remov[ing] a lot of the strict ways that we measure students in interaction with what they learn” such as “grades” and authoritative relationships with instructors. In addition, she shared her appreciation for the school “encourag[ing] parents not to help with homework and not to even look at it, if you can imagine, because the idea is that they need to own it for themselves, not because there is some structure up there, whether it’s parental or institutional, forcing them to interact with their work.” These descriptions serve as examples of the significant divergence between the type of training that children acquire in progressive independent schools and “no excuses” charters.

Associating progressive schooling with preparation for a globalized society and economy, Jasmine –who was granted a scholarship to an independent Montessori after pulling her son
from a G&T program – shared that the choice process had taught her that “traditional versus progressive” philosophies of teaching and learning was a “big deal now” and “the other thing that’s a big deal now is this worldliness. You know, is your child globally oriented?” Describing school-level factors that she considered when engaging in school choice, she explained:

Now, the kids are getting Mandarin in Pre-K, you know. It’s very interesting what’s going on in today’s world and I think a lot of it is attributed to the U.S. feeling like they’re not the global power they used to be. So in order for our children to be competitive within their future, on their path, they have to be aware of more than just English and the U.S. You got to have two or three languages under their belt. You got to know where places are, because other markets are going to be your competitive markets.

Adding to this conceptualization of schooling as a preparation for successful careers, she explained that she ultimately preferred schools that “have a peppering of both...music and art and dance” and “math and science” programming because she believed that “when people feed their passions and learn as much as they can, then they have healthy careers instead of going to a job, which I think makes us a healthier group of people.”

Further, Jasmine’s progressive preferences were related to her conceptualization of schooling as college preparedness. She remembered having to “study really, really hard just to bring myself up to level so that I was competitive with the people sitting on either side of me” in her “incredible high school, and super incredible college” because her parochial schooling had only provided her with discipline and “good basics.” As a result of her traditional schooling, she found herself lacking “all the details of all the kind of analytical stuff” and unfamiliar with the progressive culture of students “call[ing] their teacher by their
name” and “giv[ing] [their] opinion,” remembering asking herself: “Are we allowed to talk like that?” Because of this experience, she was driven to find a progressive school where her son would acquire the knowledge, skills, and disposition necessary for a “fair comparison” between peers in college.

Margaret – who sent her son to a private school after pulling him from the “no excuses” charter – revealed the mutability of preferences in describing how her perception of the racial achievement gap “shifted with the election of Barak Obama.” She explained:

People would say, “Oh, [Obama]’s one of a kind, or once in a lifetime.” I’m like, “No he’s not. I know lots of guys like him. They didn’t run for president.” Right? So, in some ways it did kind of shift my mindset, because I’m like, well, wait a minute, my son is one of those guys…. I don’t want to say he’s one of those guys, but I’m preparing him to be one of those guys.

As a result of this shift in her conceptualization of the relationship between race, gender, and academic achievement, Margaret rationalized pulled her child out of his “no excuses” charter in the middle of 3rd grade and enrolled him in a Free School – a type of private school with origins in the 1960s and 70s counterculture movement characterized by a radical philosophy of schooling wherein students learn best within ungraded school environments free of standardization and tests while engaged in individuated independent study (Dominus, 2010; Kavner, 2012). She explained that during this semester her son “socialized for the first time, extensively all day, which was really important because his social skills were kind of stunted” by his charter experience. She happily remembered him being very excited to go to school each day and perceived his time in this radically different school as “fancy babysitting” and a place for her son to: “detox from the monotonous routine and the habits” of the charter;
“read big, big books; and become “in tune with his own rights as a person.” That said, she did not reenroll him in the Free School the following year because it relocated to an inconvenient location and she was concerned that he had not learned “one iota of mathematics” and had missed “some really core things,” causing him to spend “the next two-and-a-half years with a gap that he had to constantly mend.”

**Progressive Public Schools**

Middle-class parents who made public school choices outside of their zones and/or districts also expressed a strong preference for progressive academic training. However, while the following parents were also able to access seats for their children in progressive public schools, their experiences differed from parents with children in independent schools in that they experienced disruptions caused by the related effects of high stakes testing, a lack of funding, and charter proliferation.

After pulling her son out of the Free School, Margaret enrolled him and his sister in a popular out-of-zone progressive public school. She described the school as “child-centered...not teacher-directed and scripted...holistic” with the caveat: “as much as a daily school can be.” While she was satisfied with the progressive public education her children received, she shared that a charter had recently co-located upstairs with negative repercussions for her children’s school. For instance, her children had to eat lunch at 10:30 a.m. to accommodate for multiple school schedules and she shared that the school feels “a little crowded...philosophically” given that this charter is a part of the same “no excuses” network her son had left. Further, her children’s school had received C and B grades on its last report cards with the effect of the school community “liv[ing] on the edge of fear that they're going
to evaluate us in such a way that they can close us, so that the charter school that successfully won to get upstairs, can basically take over like the borg.” Thus, while Margaret was able to actualize her progressive preference, her success and satisfaction was mitigated by the lack of control that the public school had over its own building and the looming threat of school restructuring or closure related to test scores.

Amina – a public middle school teacher - sent her oldest to an independent then parochial school until she realized that “he need[ed] more” academically, enrolling him in a popular and progressive un-zoned and lottery-based public school that she described as a “great school” where her son “thrive[d]” because it “did not have a traditional curriculum” and because she “believe[d]” that they were “exempt from the testing.” She fondly remembered the way students “really immersed themselves in culture when they were doing units in social studies,” learning about China, Nigeria, and Swaziland and conveying the message “you have an investment, a personal investment to the global community.” Speaking of discipline, she also liked that the school used “peer monitors” to help with conflict resolution before adults intervened. Regardless of her satisfaction with this school, she ultimately chose to send her oldest to live with his father in New Jersey so he could attend public schools with free extracurricular and afterschool programming that she was paying for in NYC.

Yvonne – a certified teacher and community/education organizer by profession– first sent her youngest children to a popular out-of-zone progressive public school in Park Slope. While satisfied with her son’s experience in the G&T program, she found her daughter’s experience in the general track to be lacking and had issues with the school’s leadership, teachers, and the way that the school was managing changing student demographics. Thus,
she felt compelled to reengage in the elementary choice process, eventually using social connections to access another popular out-of-zone public school in downtown Brooklyn where she was very satisfied. She described the school as an “orderly” but warm environment where students referred to the principal by her first name. She described the school as “amazing” and “exactly the school experience I want [my daughter] to have” because it is “progressive” and also “diverse” with “Parker and Connor and Zora and Zaesia and Sonia and Jayden and Michael” making up the student body. She added that students are “outside all of the time” and that they get enrichment programming like ballet. While she was ultimately able to access a seat in a progressive public school she was satisfied with, it is important to acknowledge that she was also very unsatisfied with another progressive public school and that her youngest child’s schooling was interrupted and she expended considerable time and energy in pulling her out and finding an alternative as a result.

Notably, when parents spoke of their preference for progressive public schools, they almost always conflated progressivism with student diversity. The final section is focused on parents’ conceptualization of student diversity as a means to dominant cultural capital acquisition and highlights the barriers parents across the sample faced in attempting to find and access diverse schools.

*Choice as the Pursuit of Diversity*

While parents differed in their class-based preferences for educational models, a theme running across social classes was a strong preference for diversity. Parents conceptualized diversity as a means of preparing their children to be successful in college, the job market, and society. Instead of preferring schools designed to protect and strengthen their own
culture through the acquisition of non-dominant cultural capital, eight parents explicitly preferred school environments where their children would acquire dominant cultural capital in diverse settings they perceived as providing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for thriving in the diverse but segregated NYC and in an increasingly globalized society. Importantly, they often conflated diversity with proximity to Whiteness, or access to the concentration of concentrated capital and racialized privilege they associated with White children and families.

Nailah – whose children attended zoned, out-of-zone public and the independent school she opened in her home - shared that before she was a mother she initially believed that sending children to an “all Black” school would be “great for their self-identity” and “a positive thing for them.” However, she found that her older children were negatively affected by attending their racially segregated neighborhood public school due to many factors, including the influence of:

this mentality of the Black children who went there, that it was like them against the world. I felt like they were afraid to... They didn't know how to coexist or to be in a world with other cultures. They were like aliens to some degree.

In contrast, she described the out-of-zone progressive public school that she enrolled her children in through variance as “mixed,” explaining that the “principal is a Black woman and most of the school is Caucasian” and that it was a “barrier-free school” leading it to be “very inclusive” when it comes to dis/abilities. Explaining why cultural diversity “totally became [her] obsession if [her children] were in school,” she explained:
I feel like if you have people of all cultures, socioeconomic, physical abilities working, playing, and laughing, and working through things together, then when they're hiring ... Or when they're in that position where they have the baton, it just makes them better managers, that they're able to see that everyone could, as long as they're qualified, be in the role. Where if all you know is you and your corner and this small area of the world, then you don't have that perspective.

In this statement she associated student diversity with career readiness, it is notable that she refers to diversity as preparation for careers in management and leadership from her middle-class standpoint.

Two other parents were also able to access what they described as diverse progressive public schools. Margaret preferred a multicultural experience” for her children that was similar to her own and took issue with the lack of diversity in the “no excuses” charter that her son attended until 3rd grade, arguing “this school does not look like the rest of life... All the teachers are White, all the kids are Black.” She described the racial imbalance between White staff and Black students as “very contrived” and “very magnet,” exclaiming: “We're in New York! No setting looks like that. Very few.” It is striking that Margaret associates racial imbalances between students and teachers with magnet schools, as the purpose of magnets was integration. This perhaps speaks to her frustration with the unintended consequences of public school reforms like magnets and charters. In contrast, she described the progressive public school her children attended as “economically, racially, culturally diverse,” adding the caveat that while she had found a viable free alternative, “in many instances you have to pay for the multicultural experience.” Describing what she liked about the progressive public school her youngest attended, Yvonne explained that her daughter’s class “looks like
Brooklyn, so it’s diverse,” adding that a Spanish speaking grandmother and parents from England attended a recent class party. These mothers sought out progressive schools that were as diverse as the city where they lived. Importantly, all three of these mothers had to enroll their children in public schools outside of their zone, district, and neighborhood to access this diversity and each of their positive experiences were preceded by negative experiences in other elementary schools.

Amina – a middle school teacher whose youngest son attended a predominately Black charter at the time of the interview – also had explicit preferences for diversity shaped by her childhood experiences. She rationalized her preference for diversity as an opportunity for her son to “know what it’s like to be a minority” before getting to college, with the caveat that children should have “both experiences” and be able to know and navigate their own “world” as well. Despite her strong preferences for diversity, Amina differed from the three mothers above in describing her son’s charter student body as predominately “people of color” yet diverse in the sense that there are people from “the Islands, From Africa” and “Muslims and Christians.” However, she added the caveat that “they don’t really share the culture” in the charter and she expressed concern that she “would like to know more about how they interact, and how that affects how they see themselves in the world.”

Amber – whose sons attended predominately Black charter, out-of-zone, and zoned schools – also conceptualized diversity as preparation to be a member of a global society. Relatedly, she shared that she didn’t want her son to attend an “all Black college” because she believed that “you can read it, but you want to read about Blacks and yeah, you have to know your culture, you know, know your culture, but you don’t have to live it all the time.”
described herself as being “very into different” and explained that she wanted her sons to be able to interact with people “speaking different languages, or accent” so that she could take her kids to European countries like Switzerland and Italy without getting “lost.” That said, she stated that she chose her son’s charter for its diversity and noted that he has Asian friends, then contradicted herself by describing the school as “predominately, um, Black and Hispanic” and sharing that she “feel[s] like the principal, he’s trying to keep it more Black.” Both Amina and Amber had very strong preferences for racial diversity, yet they seemed to find themselves trying to make the best of racially segregated schools that neither perceived as adequate preparation for a diverse world.

Other parents expressed frustration with the lack of diversity in their schools or the experience of being unable to access diverse schools. Sandra – whose child attended a district-zoned school after being denied enrollment in what she perceived as a more diverse public school in a Whiter and more affluent area outside of her zone – expressed her frustration with neighborhood and school segregation in NYC, arguing: “in a city as big as this I would think that diversity would be a plus, but you find that most people like the status quo, demographically wise.” Listing the negative effects of segregation, she argued that children in segregated schools “will not know how to interact with other people.” Even Daphne, whose children attended an elite independent school that she was very satisfied with, shared that she “wish[ed] that there were more diversity in the body of teachers” which she described as predominately White, adding that there were “not many Black teachers in the school.”

Finally, Beverly – a low-income mother whose oldest attended charter, public and private schools and whose niece attended a predominately Black “no excuses” charter - framed her
preference for diversity as a way to help her children not be “afraid of White people.” As noted in the preceding chapter, her conceptualization of diversity was rooted in a college experience of meeting a young Black woman who had “never been around White people” and who was afraid to interact with them as a result. Contrasting this with her own childhood experience in “a diversified elementary school” that she believed prepared her to “function better in the world,” Beverly reflected on the young woman’s future, asking: “How was she going to interact in an office, if she’s afraid of White people?” and “How are you going to interview with someone, if you're afraid of them?” She associated diversity as a preparation for college and career and conflated both of those environments with Whiteness.

Her preference for diversity was so strong that she explicitly rejected the dominant framing of racial equity as equal access to academic excellence regardless of student diversity, arguing that equitable academic training must also provide students with the knowledge, language, and dispositions necessary to successfully engage and compete with people in a diverse country and world. In fact, this theory of diversity was what motivated her to engage in choice. She explained:

What’s really important to me is that I have a diverse student body. When I was going through the issues with the schools, the people were saying to me, "Well, you know, I wouldn't really care if my school was segregated just as long as it had a decent curriculum." I felt like that wasn't okay, that wasn't acceptable for the simple fact that the world is not segregated. The United States Department of Education motto for all the children in the U.S. is that they are diverse. They gain an education that will allow them to be in the world. I don't remember it word for word, but when you read it, it’s about them being able to interact with all different races and creeds. That’s just not happening now with the way the system is set up, because everywhere is segregated. That’s my main reason when I’m looking for a school. Of course, I’m not going to find that because I don’t have the resources, economic resources, in order to have that. It’s not possible right now, unless if you're paying for school.
Beverly was the only parent in the sample who attempted to use the NCLB choice provision to transfer her daughter from her “failing” and “segregated school...where there wasn’t no diversity” in Brownsville to an audition-based public school in Manhattan that was “100% diverse” and the “highest rated school in the city” where “the kids all go to college and all kinds of stuff.” Although Beverly had done her homework and found a diverse and high-performing school with a unique academic program that she wanted for her child, she experienced nothing short of defeat. Describing the audition experience, she shared:

They said they supply slippers and stuff for them, and they didn't give her anything that she was supposed to have. They didn't supply her with her shoes. They didn't supply nothing else they said they was going to supply, because, according to them, everybody's supposed to have a chance to get there.

When Beverly's child was not selected she filed complaints with “council people,” the “Board of Ed,” and “even went to the federal government” to file a “racism complaint.” In all, Beverly made a striking five different school choices for her child during her six elementary years, with the final choice involving their family moving to New Jersey for a “better [public school] situation.” The following chapter will continue to outline the racialized costs and constraints of choice that Beverly and other parents encountered, regardless of class, analyzing the extent to which choice has ultimately had a destabilizing and depleting effect on parents and children.

**Discussion**

This chapter has demonstrated that school-level factors significantly shape parents’ aversion to public schools and school choice preferences. Ultimately, parents echoed dominant
narratives of public school crisis caused by bloated and unresponsive bureaucracy and self-interested and unqualified teachers who are protected by unions. Importantly, they also subverted these dominant narratives in critiquing the administration for over testing students and underfunding public schools. Their divergent class-based school-level preferences for “no excuses” charters and progressive schools and their general preference for diversity were dialectically related to these critiques of their neighborhood public schools. In other words, all parents were seeking what they found to be lacking in their neighborhood public schools.

School choice policies are intended to address parents concerns about public schools by providing them the power to choose from a diverse range of schools that will best serve their children. Some choice advocates argue that predominately Black charters are an extension of Black Americans creation and governance of Afrocentric independent schools with the aim of inculcating Black cultural capital (Stulberg, 2008, 2004). Under this premise, charters are disproportionately Black because Black parents are choosing schools where their children can acquire Black cultural capital. The analysis in this chapter disputes this premise. There was only scant evidence that parents are selecting schools for religious reasons or single-gender schools and only two parents referenced their preference for a school designed to serve Black students, with others rejected the approach outright. Instead, parents across the sample conceptualized in choice as a pursuit of dominant cultural capital necessary for their children to be able to successfully navigate and compete in a globalized society and economy and expressed a strong preference for diversity as a means to that end. However, while all
parents conceived choice as the pursuit of dominant cultural capital, they diverged in their class-based preferences for different educational models.

In general, low-income parents tended to prefer “no excuses” charter schools as the best and most feasible route of dominant cultural capital acquisition. Exemplifying choice as an act of subaltern agency, parents dialectically related their preference for “no excuses” charters with neighborhood public schools, associating them with higher rates of academic achievement, more robust budgets, and more expansive programming including enrichments like art and music and afterschool programs. Further, parents across the sample had mixed reactions to and experiences with the “no excuses” model, with even the strongest supporters acknowledging that the extended schedules were difficult for young children and that the disciplinary practices were controversial. Relatedly, parents who considered or chose charters expressed a frustration with the assumption of cultural deficit across all Black families, with low-income parents seeming to perceive their frustration as a necessary tradeoff for academic excellence while middle-class parents cited this among their reasons for rejecting charters.

On the other hand, middle-class parents preferred progressive schools that were child-centered, ungraded, focused on socio-emotional development, and centered on students’ independence and freedom as the route to dominant cultural capital development; all characteristics that are strikingly dissimilar to “no excuses” charters. Importantly, while they were critical of and rejected neighborhood public schools and “no excuses” educational models, some did believe that this type of academic and disciplinary training was appropriate for low-income children, just not their own middle-class children. In other
words, they did not believe that the progressive model they preferred for their children was the one just and equitable route to dominant cultural capital acquisition; instead they believed that children require different academic and disciplinary training to meet the same objective of preparedness for the global society and economy and desired a school choice marketplace in their neighborhoods that better reflected class diversity. Because of the scarcity of progressive schools within their neighborhoods, they sought private and public progressive options outside of their neighborhoods, with children enrolled in independent schools experiencing freedom from standards and testing and more stability than their counterparts in public schools who experienced the related negative effects of high-stakes testing, budget cuts, and charter proliferation.

While parents tended to have dissimilar class-based preference for educational models, many shared a conceptualization of diversity as a crucial element of dominant cultural capital acquisition in an increasingly global society and job market. Importantly, when referring to a preference for diversity, parents were more often than not referring to access to White European cultural capital. Finally, many parents, including one independent school parent who was otherwise satisfied, were frustrated by the lack of diversity in their schools or their inability to access schools where their children would have access to diverse student bodies and staff.

Another important finding is the mutability of parents’ preferences. Robert and Mariam began by conceptualizing choice of a neighborhood Afrocentric preschool and charter as investment in the neighborhood only to opt for an independent Montessori school located in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood after perceiving negative
changes in the preschool faculty and parents as a result of an economic downturn. In addition, Margaret first preferred a “no excuses” charter, reasoning that she had internalized the dominant narrative of the racial achievement gap, only to experience that her school-level preferences shifted with negative experience in the school and the election of Obama, rationalizing that her high-achieving Black son wasn’t an exception and that he needed to escape a remediating educational model and access a progressive one instead. Finally, several low-income charter parents expressed frustrated preferences for schools that recognized their cultural strengths, instilled a love of learning, or served a diverse student body, but perceived charters as a necessary trade off for academic excellence, or strong performance on standardized tests. Robert, Mariam, and Margaret were middle-class parents with the capital necessary to navigate and actualize choice outside of their neighborhoods. It is also possible that parents with less capital would also be able to rationalize and actualize shifting preferences were schools outside of their neighborhoods more easily accessible and were a more diverse range of educational models to exist in their neighborhood school choice marketplaces.
THE RACIALIZED COSTS AND CONSTRAINTS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

Public school choice policies are commonly understood to enhance parental liberty and racial educational equity through purportedly providing all parents with the freedom to leave neighborhood public schools and choose from a range of public schools regardless of neighborhood or district lines. Critiquing the colorblind pretenses of school choice policies, Osamudia James (2013) argues that race and racism “warp and impede” educational markets and that choice rhetoric veils the “racialized constraints” under which parents of color exercise choice including “unreasonable educational alternatives, educational policy problematically informed by cultural deficit models, and negative racialized experiences” that force parents of color to “bear the burden of reform” (p. 23). This chapter employs James’s framework of school choice as racial subordination to document the racialized costs incurred and constraints encountered by Black parents engaging in elementary choice. Specifically, this analysis will reveal that Black parents engaging in public school choice experience the antithesis of liberation and equity, instead feeling apprehension, anxiety, and guilt whether the public school choice market is functioning as it is intended or while encountering numerous barriers to access or sustainability. This was especially true for low-income parents, a stakeholder group assumed to benefit the most from school choice.

This chapter is organized in three sections. The first section documents a trend of elementary school mobility and frames the hidden parental labor of choice as potentially
ongoing and iterative process of researching, applying for, then choosing/being chosen by a school; attempting to make school of choice sustainable; deciding to leave an untenable school of choice; and recommencing the choice process. As this chapter will demonstrate, a striking eleven of twenty parents participating in this study made more than one elementary school choice for at least one child. This finding represents the dysfunction of the educational market created by race and racism, as the first elementary school choice was only the beginning of a protracted and sometimes harrowing elementary school choice process for many parents in this sample. Rejecting the simplistic binary of “choosers” and “non-choosers” (see Teske, 2001; Goldring and Phillips, 2008; Weitzel, 2016) or simplistic labels like “charter parents” often employed in school choice research, this study frames all parents as engaged in choice - even when choosing their neighborhood public schools - and reveals public school choice as a potentially ongoing and iterative process that does not end with initial school selection for many parents. Just as parents’ preferences are mutable, parents’ elementary choices are not static and should not be treated as such in research. For example, a label like “private school parent” masks the complex preferences and experiences of a parent who has chosen public, charter, and private schools for their child. Further, many parents’ school choice stories were as much about their efforts to keep their child enrolled in what they perceived to be an incompatible or untenable school of their choice and why they ultimately chose to exit these schools as they were about their rationale for choosing schools in the first place.

Assuming all actors incur costs in competitive markets – social systems where individuals pursue their own welfare by competing for scarce resources and engaging in mutually
beneficial trades - the second section documents the racialized costs of time, energy, material resources, and psychological wellbeing incurred by parents when the school choice market operates as it is intended, with equal opportunities to choose but inequitable access created by scarcity of quality schools that is key to competition and demand (Stone, 2012). Extending James’s concept of racialized constraints, this chapter will document the various ways Black families who have experienced high rates of student mobility have incurred racialized costs such as expenditures of parental time, energy, material resources, and psychological well being. While the detrimental impact of school mobility on students’ academic achievement has been documented by research (Mehana and Reynolds, 2004), this analysis addresses a gap in school choice literature by focusing on the racialized costs of multiple school moves incurred by parents. The sometimes ongoing and iterative labor of the school choice process constituted what several parents described as full-time work that drained their economic and emotional resources and limited their time to acquire capital and care for themselves and their families. These finding suggests that public school choice policies intended to enhance liberty and equity often come at a great price for Black families, even when the school choice market functions as it is intended to.

The third and final section of analysis documents the racialized constraints parents’ encountered while engaging in elementary school choice to identify instances where the market-based school choice reforms are not operating correctly. Parents experienced racialized constraints to public school choice access and sustainability regardless of socioeconomic status, while attempting to make sound choices in a shifting and inequitable school choice marketplace. Echoing James (2013), the parents who participated in this study
referred to the scarcity of proximal “quality public schools” and “reasonable alternatives,” described preferences and choices that were delimited by cultural deficit theories framing their home culture as inadequate preparation for academic success, and perceived their choices as reluctant yet necessary responses to “highly racialized educational experiences that push them out of the public school system” (p. 29, 32, 39). The focus of this section will be identifying the ways in which the market-based elementary public school choice reform is not functioning well for Black parents and their children.

**Choice as a Potentially Ongoing and Iterative Process**

Eleven of twenty parents in this sample experienced elementary school choice as an iterative and ongoing process that involved: researching, applying for, choosing/being chosen by, struggling with, ultimately deciding to exit, and recommencing the process. The graph on the following page describes the school choices of parents who chose more than one school for at least one of their children during elementary school. Importantly, these numbers only represent the count of elementary schools that each of their children were enrolled in, not all of the schools that parents considered, engaged with, and applied to while engaging in the elementary choice process.
Three trends are worthy of note in this graph. First, five of these eleven mothers made more choices for their first-born child than subsequent children, potentially indicating that parents accrue school choice-related embodied cultural capital – or skills, knowledge, and dispositions – over time and/or that the policy of sibling preference common in schools of choice simplifies the process for subsequent children. Speaking to accrual of public school choice cultural capital over time, Yvonne shared that she did not know the rules of the public school choice game such as application deadlines and school tours and had considered “over ten” schools when moving her 2nd child from his first school, yet learned the rules of the game with him and proudly only considered three schools when moving her 3rd child from

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1Nailah had eight children, six of whom were no longer in elementary school. The choices for those children are aggregated in the category “1st child.” Deborah had moved with her children to two different states before moving to NYC.
her first school. Further, she explained that she had “learned” as a result of her cumulative choice experiences and had become “active” in her 3rd child’s second school, potentially with the intention of making the school a more sustainable choice in the long run.

Speaking to her initial lack of cultural capital and the costs incurred when engaging in choice, Ebenita – whose oldest attended three different elementary schools – explained:

> Who would have thought to ask, “Hey, do I need to know if you have this, if you have that?” It’s very difficult. You usually don’t know what you need until you need it, and by then it’s too late. Again, the children are the ones feel the greatest effect of that.

Amina described missing G&T test and school application deadlines for her first child and frequently referenced knowing very little about elementary public school choice process because she had attended Catholic school and was a middle school teacher. Remembering how little she knew about the school choice process when she pulled her oldest from his first school, she described compiling a notebook containing her son’s parochial schoolwork and report cards, walking into public schools that she was interested in regardless of zone, and remembering being told: "Find a school in your neighborhood that has room" or "We’re full. Get out...Go look somewhere else in your neighborhood.” Reflecting on this initial public school choice experience, she explained that it left a “bad taste in my mouth,” adding that it led her to think: "You’re going to be sheep...I don’t want that for my children.” In Amina’s case, it is also possible that she kept her 2nd child in one school up through to 4th grade precisely because she had learned that moving her 1st child three times had detrimental effects. This relation between parents’ lack of school choice cultural capital and school mobility is important to note, especially as the school choice marketplace changes rapidly
with closures of parochial schools and the proliferation of charters.

The second trend worth noting is nine of these eleven parents enrolled at least one child in three or more different schools within just six years of elementary schooling. This led to significant interruptions of children’s schooling and required parents to expend considerable time, resources, and energy in recommencing the school choice process with every move. (It is important to note that this study is limited by the decision to interview parents with children at any elementary grade level. Seven parents had children in kindergarten or 1st grade and may have felt compelled to move their children since being interviewed; thus, based on the experiences of parents with older children, rates of school mobility may be even higher in this sample years later as parents have had more time in schools.)

The final trend worth noting is eight of the eleven parents who made more than one choice for at least one child were low-income, single mothers who began the school choice process with capital deficits and incurred significant costs, a finding that will be documented in the following section of analysis. Notably, Cynthia and Beverly, both low-income single mothers, enrolled their children in a striking five different elementary schools over the course of just six years. Their school choice stories are documented in their entirety below because they introduce themes of racialized costs and constraints that emerged across parents’ school choice stories that will be analyzed in subsequent sections. Themes running across their stories include the hidden labor of advocating for children in schools of choice in efforts to make them sustainable; the significant loss of time, energy, and material resources associated with the ongoing and iterative cycle of school choice that many parents experienced; and racialized constraints to accessing and being able to sustain public schools of choice.
Cynthia was a single mother with no formal employment who lived with her parents in Bed Stuy. Her school choice stories were embedded in a larger retrospective narrative about her concern and advocacy for her special needs son who was in 6th grade at the time of the interview. In kindergarten her son was diagnosed by the DOE as Emotionally Disturbed (ED), a subjective category of special needs that is disproportionately used to label Black children (James, 2013; Ferri and Connor, 2005). She had long believed that this was a misdiagnosis and that her son was autistic. Cynthia’s school choice story is comprised of continual efforts to make schools of her choice sustainable followed by decisions to exit and recommence the choice process. It begins with feeling compelled to pull her son out of his first neighborhood zoned public school during kindergarten because she disagreed with teachers who decided he did not need to be enrolled in a special needs class.

Her second elementary school choice was a neighborhood charter where her son finished kindergarten and 1st grade. She decided to pull him out of this charter due to concerns about teacher inadequacy and protracted conflicts with charter leadership about his IEP and their resistance to “pay[ing] for him to get the services he needed inside the charter school.” She remembered becoming increasingly worried that “he wasn’t going to get any [special needs] services” in the charter and recalled that other parents with special needs children were also struggling, stating: “it was almost like they were trying to take out all the kids that had some kind of special needs issue.” Relatedly, she told a story about another mother of a child with special needs who made what she framed as a pragmatic decision to “grin and bear it,” reasoning that she made a different choice because she had four children and a more
demanding work schedule. Cynthia contrasted this mother’s choice to stay as engaging in a “constant battle” with the charter with her decision to leave, which she described as “tuck[ing] my tail beneath my legs.” In other words, she perceived her choices at this juncture as a sustained and inevitable conflict with the charter or a cowardly decision to leave. Attempting to understand the differences between her choice to exit and this mother’s choice to stay and fight, she described herself as having a different temperament, remembering thinking to herself: “I can only take so much of this before I lose it on you and everybody’s going to be calling the police.”

This experience of feeling driven out of a charter that is unresponsive to parent concerns is aligned with findings that NYC charters systematically under-enroll students with special needs when compared to public schools and that students with IEPs voluntarily leave or are pushed-out of charters with higher frequency than their general education peers (Gabor, 2014; Domanico, 2015). Importantly, this was not an isolated issue for Cynthia as she had a similar experience when attempting to enroll her son in another charter for 5th grade where he performed poorly on a placement exam. She remembered that a coordinator called to say that the charter could not “accommodate” him, adding that she would be “remiss to tell you to bring him here.” Reflecting on her experience, she complained: “before they even gave him a chance, they were already trying to weed him out.”

Charters are bound by law to serve all students, regardless of ability or placement test scores, yet this was an instance of a common charter practice of “counseling out” special needs students also documented by research (Miron, 2014; Torre, 2014). Her two experiences of charter push- and counseling-out are examples of racialized constraints on choice created by
the schism of accountability pressures on charters designed to close the racial achievement gap by improving standardized test scores and Black children being over-identified for special education services that charters can legally resist providing. Recognizing that charters disproportionality serve Black children in NYC, Cynthia provided necessary nuance to the racialized constraints associated with these charter practices, explaining that charter leaders do not want “special” or “problem” Black children because they will diminish the charters’ test performance.

Cynthia pulled her son out of his charter at the end of 2nd grade after attaining a work variance with the goal of moving him into a public school located outside of their neighborhood. In 3rd grade the DOE placed him in a public school located in a predominately Orthodox Jewish neighborhood where the children were “mostly Mexican and maybe Lebanese people...and maybe like Arab” and where there were very few Black students. Reflecting on her initial draw to the school, she shared: “So I figured, he’s in this all, practically White school, and, it’d be better, it will just be better.” Importantly, she coded the school as White and “better” even though she described the student body as Mexican, Lebanese, and Arab, suggesting that her use of White actually referred to the absence of Black people in and around the school. During 3rd grade her son regularly fought with a Hispanic boy in his special education class who called him the “N-word” and a “homosexual” every day, which Cynthia assumed was due to the fact that “he was the only one...African American.” As a result, he was constantly threatened with suspension, causing Cynthia to expend considerable time and energy requesting that the principal address the racism her son encountered and teach students conflict resolution skills. She even found a curriculum
for the principal to use and volunteered to support its implementation. After the principal was unresponsive then hostile towards these efforts, Cynthia filed a complaint with the superintendent, spurring an investigation of the school and increased tension between her and school leadership.

Cynthia felt compelled to exit this school because of this traumatizing racialized school experience, moving her son back to a neighborhood school at the beginning of 4th grade. Making this choice she reasoned, “he didn’t have any friends in the area” due to attending school outside the neighborhood. Unfortunately, she described his time in the neighborhood public school as “the worst experience for both of us” because of constant fighting between students to the level of “mayhem” and her son again facing a persistent threat of suspension. Despite her objective to help him connect to neighborhood kids, her son was “petrified” if he saw teachers or other students outside of the school. She explained that while neighborhood children hadn’t known him before, now they referred to him “with a negative connotation, so he doesn’t really want anybody to know him.”

Thus, she recommenced the process of finding yet another alternative “because he wasn’t doing well and he was declining, quick,” remembering thinking that if she didn’t move him: “I don’t even think he would of made it to high school, or junior high for that matter, because has like totally shutting down, like, the school just took him on a downward spiral.” As with his previous schools, she felt compelled to simultaneously assume a time- and energy-consuming role of full-time advocate for her son, explaining: “I might as well put my pajamas on and stayed at the school, cause I was there like every day” in order to “get to the bottom of whatever the problem was” (italics added to convey her emphasis). To this end, she began
saving his paperwork and gathering what limited information she could find about private school options for students with special needs. She conceptualized choice at this juncture as “ammunition in her back pocket,” suggesting that she thought of herself as preparing for battle or war with the public school system.

To attain that ammunition Cynthia also engaged in a protracted struggle with the NYCDOE between 1st and 5th grade to have her son’s initial diagnosis of ED overturned for autism so that he could access specific supports and specialized services for autistic children. She was motivated to seek out a reevaluation because she perceived the district as using the ED label “to save money because, ED, they can just throw them into a special education classroom inside their, inside of BOE (sic), but if they would have said autism...they would have to pay for the private school.” She finally resolved this conflict at the beginning of 5th grade by resorting to paying for a private evaluation that resulted in an autism diagnosis. This diagnosis led to a school referral and a district voucher that allowed her son to attend a private special needs school tuition-free. Notably, this accomplishment also came with costs. In addition to the time, labor, and costs incurred while attaining his reevaluation, she remembered her that her social worker at the time “didn't really extend herself” to help her with the process of finding and accessing a seat in a special needs private school and that she had to do “a lot of her footwork,” figuring out the process and enrolling him herself.

Reflecting on the public school choice cultural capital she acquired over the course of her son’s six “very stressful” elementary school years, she explained: “I learned all of this after the fact, but, I learned it. [laughs] Eventually. There’s no map for it. Definitely not a map.”

_Beverly_
Beverly was a single mother who was living in Brownsville, had no formal employment, and had also enrolled her 1st child in five different schools during the course of six elementary years. The dominant themes of her school choice story are restricted access and the constrained choices she felt compelled to make. Perhaps foreshadowing her experiences, she first learned about the public school system before her 1st child was school age when attending Board of Education meetings where “everybody was confused” and “there was a lot of yelling and shouting” about changes to special education and the emergence of charters. She first applied to an estimated 10 charters at a time when charters “were just about starting.” Her daughter was waitlisted after the charter lotteries, so she first enrolled her daughter in parochial school as a back up plan, waiting for a charter seat to open up. Her daughter’s initial parochial schooling was interrupted in 1st grade when she was called off of a charter waiting list. However, her daughter only attended this charter for the first half of 1st grade. Beverly pulled her out after her daughter was flashed in the bathroom and she believed that the charter did not handle the situation well. Insinuating that the charter had larger organizational issues, Beverly also mentioned that it was closed for what she believed to be embezzlement after they left.

She then reenrolled her daughter in parochial school through 2nd grade. Explaining her subsequent reasons for pulling her out of parochial school for the second time, she explained that the Catholic Church “started closing down all the schools in the district,” leading to overcrowding in her daughter’s school with an anticipated 40 kids slotted for her 3rd grade class. The fact that Beverly encountered school closings with both her charter and parochial choices during her first three years of navigating elementary school choice speaks to the
shifting and inequitable nature of the school marketplace she was attempting to navigate. This also speaks to racialized constraints on parochial school choice. This study has demonstrated that parochial schools have historically been an alternative to neighborhood public schools for Black families, yet the effects of rapid changes to the school choice market caused by charter proliferation made parochial schools an unsustainable option for Beverly and other parents.

After both parochial and charter schools proved to be unsustainable alternatives to the neighborhood public school, Beverly decided to homeschool her daughter in 3rd grade. While two other parents mentioned homeschooling as a last resort option in their choice sets, Beverly was the only parent in the sample to homeschool her child. She decided to take this route after determining that her daughter “wasn't getting...into any decent public school” and running across information about homeschooling online. Through her research Beverly learned that, unlike other states that “supply you with computers, books, curriculum,” New York did not provide that support because it “is not a homeschooling state.” However, just because Beverly engaged in school choice, did not mean she was necessarily thought of school choice as the solution. Critiquing New York homeschooling policy, she complained: “They do not want you to stay home and homeschool your kid, but they don’t want to fix the school system. It’s like you're in between a rock and a hard place.” That is, she felt compelled to choose homeschooling as a response to the scarcity of quality public options, not as an expression of her liberty to control her child’s education.

Further, after ruling parochial and charter schools out, she took on financial burdens because homeschooling was not funded by the state. She paid a monthly flat fee of “like $20 a month”
for a virtual curriculum she was satisfied with and also paid for a tutor to come to her house and work with her daughter on subjects like math. However, by the end of the year she conflicted with the school district about testing policies and she and her daughter found the experience to be socially isolating. Noting related racial, socioeconomic, and geographic issues with homeschooling as choice, she shared that social gatherings with other homeschooling families were held far from her home in predominately White and affluent areas like “Manhattan or Park Slope,” adding that she “couldn’t find anybody in my neighborhood that was homeschooling [because] many people in my neighborhood can’t afford that.” Beverly ultimately decided to stop homeschooling because her daughter did not connect with the other children and because it was “expensive,” explaining: “I wasn’t making that much money. Then, after I started homeschooling her, I wasn’t making any money.” In other words, she incurred racialized costs of social isolation and of the perceived need to drop out of the labor force in order to homeschool her daughter, a route that seemed like the only quality alternative to neighborhood public, parochial, and charters at the time.

After discontinuing homeschooling, Beverly enrolled her daughter in the neighborhood public school, explaining that her daughter begged to attend a traditional school again. However, she pulled her daughter out after just one semester of 4th grade because she was concerned that it was academically failing and because the “kids...had no discipline, no guidance.” At this juncture, she attempted to use what she perceived as her NCLB granted right to transfer her child out of their neighborhood zoned public school and into a high-performing audition-based public school located in Manhattan, a chapter of her school choice story that was documented at the end of Chapter 5. After her failed efforts to convince local
and federal government agencies to help her access this school, she decided to move to New Jersey and live with a family member so that her daughter could complete her elementary schooling in a better public school. Reflecting on this decision, she clarified: “I didn’t move because I wanted to be in Jersey. I moved and it was in Jersey, because it was a better situation for her.” Once again, because of perceived scarcity of quality public and private schools, Beverly incurred racialized costs in order to access a quality public school by relocating to another state in order to access better public schools.

The Racialized Costs of Choice in a Functioning Market

Both Cynthia and Beverly’s school choice stories are extreme examples of elementary school mobility, yet their stories introduced themes of racialized costs parents incur that emerged across the school choice stories of the eleven parents who also moved their children once or more. While the school choice market functioned appropriately in providing parents with the liberty to escape unsustainable schools and choose alternatives, the eleven parents who made more than one choice for a child bore the burden of school choice reform in expending considerable time, energy in finding a school; experiencing schools of choice to be problematic and requiring intervention; leaving a school they found to be unsustainable, and recommencing the choice process. As a result of these experiences, they also carried psychological burdens of anxiety, guilt, apprehension, and exhaustion and understood this as a necessary tradeoff for their children’s protection from damaging school environments and academic progress.

The school choice market functioned as it was intended for both Cynthia and Beverly, as it did for the other parents whose experiences are documented below. Each time parents felt
compelled to pull their child out of one school, school choice policy allowed them to do so and choose alternatives. That said, parents internalized the dominant narratives of engaging in school choice as good parenting, understood their children's academic achievement to be a product of their educational choices, and encountered a scarcity of quality schools; thus, they experienced considerable psychological distress throughout the process. For instance, they carried the burdens of stress about making the right decision within a rapidly shifting and unequal marketplace and guilt about making the wrong decision when schools of choice proved unsustainable and having to pull their children out. This section of analysis is dedicated to documenting the racialized costs parents and their children incurred as they experienced school mobility and charter lotteries and waiting lists.

The Costs of School Mobility

Education researchers use the term “school mobility” to refer to multiple student school moves. According to research, high rates of school mobility are largely an urban phenomenon and have adverse consequences for students and schools including increased risk for low academic achievement, grade retention, and school suspension (Mehana and Reynolds, 2004). As the graph on page 4 demonstrated, eleven of the twenty parents in this sample moved their children to another school once or more during the course of their elementary years, disrupting a time understood to be vital in that it is a developmental period when “foundations for school-based learning take hold” and when basic literacy and math skills “are in their early development” (ibid, p. 94). As only four of the eleven parents who experienced school mobility attributed at least one move to residential relocation, the high rates documented by the study are understood to be at least partially an effect of
academically underperforming schools concentrated in Black neighborhoods, expanded choices created by public school choice policy, and racialized experiences in public schools. School mobility is understood to negatively impact students’ academic achievement because it disrupts student learning and relationships with peers and school staff (ibid). In this sense, the negative effects of school mobility are racialized costs incurred by children and contradictory to the objective of enhancing academic achievement through school choice. Moreover, low-income, single mothers who start the school choice process with less capital to begin with primarily incur these racialized costs.

Parents who moved their children once or more remembered doing so reluctantly, with some explicitly aware of the detrimental impact school mobility had on their children, yet remembering seeing no reasonable alternatives. Margaret - whose son attended three different elementary schools – retrospectively explained: “One of the important things is stability. If you make the right choice from the outset, then your child gets to enjoy stability.” Like other parents in this sample, she carried the emotional burdens of conceptualizing academic achievement as the result of parents’ sound educational decisions and personal responsibility for what she perceived as having made two unsound choices for her son. She contrasted her decision to pull her son out of a “no excuses’ charter with other parents who got “ensnared in the shiny walls, because you don’t move your kids willy nilly, left and right. It takes some balls to do that.” While she carried the weight of guilt and personal responsibility for choosing to leave, she also believed that this had taken courage on her part and framed the alternative as being trapped in an unsustainable school only to avoid instability.
Deborah – a single mother of two who had just moved back to NYC after raising her children in two other states – expressed a preference for stability, stating: “No matter how much we move around or do something, I try to keep them in the same school just to keep something the same.” That said, she felt she had no other choice but to change her children’s elementary school for the fourth time because their teachers were unqualified and leadership was unresponsive to her advocacy efforts. She described her reluctance to moving them, stating: “I don’t want to keep … I prefer not to keep switching my child. I purposely picked their school, six through twelve for a middle school because all that switching, it’s just too much.”

In other words, while she felt like she had no choice but to move her children in order to access a quality public elementary school alternative, she had a deferred hope that choice would provide them with stability in middle school.

On the other hand, Amber – whose oldest attended three different elementary schools – remembered that a concern for stability is what motivated her to keep her youngest in a charter where the principal was being fired and test scores were declining, explaining: “the only reason why I didn’t want to pull [him] out of the school from 2nd to 3rd grade is because, or even mid-year of 3rd, is because I didn’t want to bounce my child around.” Similarly, Patricia – a single mother of three whose oldest attended parochial school - also shared a strong preference for stability, explaining that while she’d prefer a “cheaper” public alternative, she did not want to “disrupt where she’s at right now” or “disrupt her environment.” Further, Patricia strongly associated charters with instability, sharing a story about a friend whose son attended a charter until 2nd grade when the charter was revoked, forcing her to move him to a parochial school. While Patricia’s primary preference was for
“free” charters, she decided to keep her daughter in parochial and out of charters because she associated charters with closures and didn’t want her daughter to “be transferred somewhere else,” preferring instead that her daughter experience being in a “graduating class” with children who she attended elementary school with all along. This issue of charter unreliability and closures was a trend of concern across interviews and will be addressed in the section on racialized constraints that follows.

A core element of market-based logic is that all consumers engaging in cost-benefit analysis. While research has documented detrimental effects of school mobility on children’s achievement, little is known about its effects on parents and families. In *The Paradox of Choice*, psychologist Barry Schwartz (2004) argues that while expanded choices have provided all consumers with more options and opportunities in all aspects of their lives, they have also led to decisions that require more effort, increased the potential of mistakes, and have made the psychological effects of mistakes more severe. As the preceding stories demonstrated, parents carry the emotional burdens related to trying to find and access a quality school, maintain stability for their children despite unsustainable school environments, responsibility for not having made sound school choices, and creating instability when moving children. In addition to the negative impact of school mobility on their children, parents made what they perceived as necessary sacrifices of time, energy, and material resources while iteratively navigating the school choice process and finding it necessary to advocate for their children in schools of their choice.

While it is easy to conceptualize the economic costs of private school tuition or homeschooling curriculum, primarily low-income parents expended unquantifiable amounts
of time, energy, and resources in advocating for their children and navigating the public school choice market. For instance, while Cynthia – whose school choice story was featured in full above – accrued tangible economic costs in paying for the private evaluation that eventually helped her access a voucher for her son’s private special needs school; however, there is no way to measure the amount of time and energy she expended advocating for her son in each unsustainable school of choice and in her five year struggle with an unresponsive bureaucracy about his evaluation. In addition, Cynthia jokingly referred to sleeping at her son’s last neighborhood public school because she was there advocating for him “every day.” Similarly, Deborah described a preference for a public school with strong structure, academic standing, and plans for improvement so that she would know “what you all are doing with my child” so that she did not “have to be there every day.” In this sense she conceived the opportunity to choose a quality school as a means to freeing up her time and energy. Their experiences account for the hidden and highly taxing labor of having children enrolled in neighborhood public schools and school choice for Black parents.

Further, both Cynthia and Beverly expended a considerable amount of time and energy researching and navigating the school choice market and process, as they chose from a wide range of school types and each moved their children multiple times. Similarly, Yvonne – a single mother of three whose youngest children each attended two different schools - shared that she “did more research on elementary schools in this city than I did with my oldest son for college” and “created like a damn near press kit” for her second child that she sent out to an estimated 10 different schools. Ebenita – a single mother whose oldest attended three different schools – described her elementary school choice process as “insane” and “very
difficult,” sharing:

I’ve applied to every school in NYC. I’ve just had the approach of try everything and whatever might come through, then we’ll figure it out then; so every single charter school, mailing applications, faxing them in, requesting them, sending stamped envelopes with your own envelopes to receive one back, all of it; going to the schools, school visits, school tours, all of those things; so just meeting that lottery deadline.

Had any of these single, low-income mothers had quality public school options from the start, perhaps they would have been able to focus their time and energy on taking care of themselves and their families and/or building their capital instead of incurring racialized costs of navigating a racially constrained educational marketplace. However, parent did not have this option and saw no other course besides sacrificing time, energy, and resources with the hope of eventually accessing a quality school for their children. In fact, Michellene – a Haitian immigrant without formal employment whose son attended a neighborhood public and charter school - was the only parent in the entire sample who spoke of intentionally limiting her school choice set to only one charter precisely because she saw the choice process as time-consuming.

Other mothers referenced professional and financial costs they incurred by engaging in the related labor of advocating for their children and engaging in public school choice. These unanticipated costs of the ongoing and iterative public school choice process are especially troubling considering that research has documented an extensive racial wealth-gap between Black and White American households (Holland, 2016). Margaret – a married, middle-class mother whose oldest child attended three different elementary schools – spoke of the professional and economic sacrifices she had made in choosing schools for her children. At
the time of the interview, she had pulled her son out of a "no excuses" charter and Free School and her daughter out of an out-of-zone public Pre-K program and had enrolled them both in an out-of-zone public school. Explaining her decision not to work, she explained: “I had to put two children in a new school for the second time in two years, so I needed to be there to smooth the way for them. I wanted to be there because I thought it would be a difficult transition.” As mentioned in Chapter 5, Margaret made multiple school moves only to find the out-of-zone public school she chose was threatened by the co-location of a charter from a powerful charter network. Perhaps in an effort to keep the school a sustainable choice, Margaret became intensely involved in public hearings about this co-location and negotiations between the schools. Describing the extent of her involvement in what was her son’s third elementary school she shared: “My son wrote a poem: ‘My mom, she’s cool. She works at my school.’...He didn’t realize I don’t actually work [t]here.”

Margaret described what she saw as the reality of parents having to “make tremendous sacrifices” because they’re “too many snags along the way” in elementary school choice. She expressed her desire to “handle her home front” and ”keep moving on with my life” instead of being compelled to take on what she perceived as the task of “reforming New York City public education” as her “part-time, unpaid job.” In fact, the extent of personal and professional sacrifices she had made as a parent engaging in school choice was such a pressing issue that she closed her interview with the following statement:

It should be easier. I want to focus on making a living, and a life. I don’t want to focus as much as I’ve had to on navigating the New York City educational landscape, public, private, charter, or otherwise... People got to make a living. Well, they got to make a life. This is probably my own fault to be over-engaged and invested, but I feel like I had to be in order to navigate my children.
Similarly, Amber – a low-income, single mother of two - was so concerned about her youngest child’s negative experience at a charter – his first of three elementary schools – that she felt compelled to quit her job as an office manager in the City Marshal’s office in order to “stay on my child...keep up with him” because he had academic and behavior issues, with many “in house” suspensions and twelve out-of-school suspensions during his 3rd grade year. She continued to feel compelled to forsake full-time work in order to advocate for her son and navigate choice after exiting the charter. First, she applied to a magnet lottery and was selected, yet she and her son then encountered what she described as a “disrespectful” and “racist” teacher and conflicts with administration over their decision to retain her son in 3rd grade. Reflecting on this experience, she remembered thinking: “Oh, this school really wants me to just drown” and telling her son “we’re going to stay above water.” These negative racialized experiences led her to feel compelled to recommence school choice process for the third time, enrolling her son in a neighborhood public school that she initially thought of as her last resort but unexpectedly found to be a quality school.

Moreover, Ebenita – a mother of three whose oldest had attended G&T, neighborhood public, and charter schools - also shared that she had decided to sacrifice full-time work in order to support her children’s attendance at a “no excuses” charter located far from her home. While she applied to charters that were much closer to her home, a charter in Brownsville ultimately selected her children in their lottery. As a result, her daily routine involved waking at 5:15 a.m., arriving at the city bus stop at 6 a.m., and the charter bus stop at 6:30 a.m., with roughly an hour of return travel after school ended at 4 p.m. Monday-Thursday
and 1 p.m. every Friday. While appreciative that the charter compels parents to be involved, she shared that these conditions have her “bouncing all over the place” professionally. Explaining that while she was doing a little bit of work as a social worker or paralegal, she said she found it impossible to have a full-time job considering the travel involved and the charter's irregular schedule. Speaking of the dilemma of the racialized costs associated with school choice, she explained:

It's really a catch-22 because it affects everything and you have to try to make a choice between what sacrifices you want to make and how to keep your head above water, but still give them the best opportunities that you can. It's rough. It's really rough.

Strikingly, both Ebenita and Amber made reference to their efforts to keep their own and their children's heads “above water” while sharing stories of the psychological and financial costs they incurred while engaging in choice. This metaphorical language suggests they both experienced choice as an ongoing and high-risk process of treading water.

It is also important to note that Ebenita was one of thirteen parents in the sample who had enrolled at least one of their children in schools far outside of walking distance from their homes at some point in their elementary years. Sharing a similar schedule, Delphine – a low-income single mother and immigrant from the Ivory Coast – a low-income single mother and immigrant from the Ivory Coast who was not formally they woke up at 5:30 a.m. every morning to travel to school and did hours of homework together after the school day ended at either 4 or 5 p.m. She also added that she knew another family who woke at 4:30 a.m. to make their journey to the charter from Queens. In all three cases, these parents perceived the costs of extensive travel as necessary in order to access academic excellence.
Relatedly, children also made social connections at the schools they attended outside of their neighborhoods and both they and their parents incurred costs related to the social and geographic distance between their homes and their school peer groups. For instance, Margaret explained that she was not a “play-date mom” who would arrange and travel to organized meetings with other students from the schools her children attended, and for that reason she described her children’s experiences as “isolating.” In the same vein, Cynthia enrolled her son in a neighborhood public school precisely because she was worried he had not developed any neighborhood friendships due to attending school outside of the neighborhood. Further, when homeschooling her daughter, Beverly expended time and energy to travel to social meetings far from her neighborhood with children who her daughter ultimately did not connect with.

_Deleting Charter Lotteries and Waiting Lists_

A major factor in Beverly’s school mobility story was a charter school lottery and waiting list. As a reminder, she initially applied to charters, her daughter was placed on a waiting list, she enrolled her in a parochial school as a stop-gap measure until a seat in a charter opened up, and she moved her daughter into a charter once one did. Anxiety, apprehension, and disruptions created by high charter demand evidenced by lotteries and waiting lists was a theme that ran across parents’ school choice stories. Charter advocates commonly argue that the demand for charters far outweighs the supply of seats in lobbying for the expansion of the charter sector.

Scarcity of seats in charters is a significant issue in NYC. The NYC Charter School Center (2016) recently reported a total of 68,000 applicants for only 23,600 charter seats, with an
estimated 65% percent of applicants on waiting lists for 2016-2017 and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools recently reported that NYC has the longest charter waiting list in the country (Chapman and Colangelo, 2015). These numbers undergird charter advocates’ efforts to frame NYS’s cap on charter school expansion and the current mayor’s lack of lobbying to lift it as an injustice to presumably desperate parents. As this study has proven, these numbers only tell a portion of the school choice story; while charter advocates seem to make the case that charters are parents’ only public option, the data from this study proves otherwise, with many parents simultaneously applying for G&T and variances and using social networks to access out-of-zone public schools. In some cases, charters were actually a final public resort after parents were not able to access significantly scarcer seats in G&T programs and out-of-zone public schools. However, parents’ experiences with charter lotteries and waiting lists are important to document because they represent a significant facet of racialized costs for Black parents since charters are disproportionately concentrated in Black neighborhoods.

New York charter policy requires charters to engage in a lottery for seats when applications outnumber available seats, with provisions for a weighted lottery wherein charters can use enrollment preferences for categories such as “at-risk of academic failure” or living in the neighborhood where the charter is located. When supply is lower than demand, as it is for charters in NYC, lotteries are used to politically symbolize “absolute fairness” because they do not allow “bias, favoritism, or pull” and they serve to “dampen citizens’ anger” and cause them to be “more likely to blame fate then politicians for their predicament” (Stone, 2012, p. 56). While selection by random selection is intended to be the fairest way to deal with
applications that exceed the capacity of each charter, parents apprehensively perceived lotteries as rigged or unfair, experienced participation in lotteries and placement on waiting lists as an anxiety ridden process, and questioned why their sincere efforts to access a seat in what has been marketed to them as a quality public school option should be left up to random chance.

In addition to applying to lotteries and being wait-listed with her daughter, Beverly had recently applied to an estimated ten lotteries for her niece who she had legal guardianship of. The charter that eventually selected her niece was further from her home than proximal charters with no capacity, meaning she won the lottery but incurred the costs of travel time. After going through the lottery process with both her daughter and niece, Beverly was apprehensive about the lack of transparency and expressed concerns about staff potentially culling undesirable families. Further, she likened applying to charters lotteries as an act of gambling with high-stakes consequences of school failure for children, stating:

I just feel like the fact that it's a lottery, why do I need to gamble to make sure my child has a decent education? I don't feel that I should have to gamble when there's a school around the corner. I have to wake up at the crack of dawn to get my kid to school at 7:00 in the morning across town when I could just walk around the corner, if the school system was the way it was supposed to be. The whole charter school issue, I'm against charter schools only because I feel that public school should be right. There shouldn't be a need for charter schools. You know what I'm saying? It doesn't make any sense that we have to have these charters. Why? When we have all these free schools, why can't the schools just have the proper curriculum and all of our children just go to school and learn? Why does it have to be a gamble for my kids to get a decent education? If my kid doesn't get into any lottery, then I'm stuck with the district school that's failing. That's not fair. How can my child survive in the world, if she doesn't have the choices that every other kid does in this city? It's not fair.
Remembering the experience of having to pull her oldest from her second elementary school, Ebenita explained that she primarily applied to charters and had “stacks of mail, wait-list number 208, wait-list number seventy-this, wait list number one hundred and this, wait list number just constantly pouring in, it’s insane.” She also shard a story about physically attending a charter lottery that she described as “a nightmare” and “disheartening” because “they push, push, push for you to come to the lottery” even though “it was basically impossible for any student to get into the school outside of the district, simply by the numbers.” She felt guilty for “subjecting” her children to the excitement of the event and the allure of the charter program only to have their spirits crushed when their names were not called. Further, like Beverly and many other charter parents, her children were eventually selected by a lottery when her oldest reached 5th grade by a charter that was far from home yet wait-listed for a proximal charter in the same charter network. This created a win-lose paradox for Ebenita in that she won the lottery but incurred the personal and professional costs of extensive travel.

Michellene’s primary preference was for a charter she applied to three years in a row before giving up after staff informed her that her son was not eligible for the lottery after 3rd grade. Her son was waitlisted by that charter and attended the neighborhood public school until 3d grade when he was invited to enroll in another charter taking children off of her preferred charter’s waitlist. In other words, after three years of persistently applying to the one charter she was interested in and making the best of her neighborhood public school, Michellene was offered a seat in another charter that she never heard of, considered, or vetted. Remarkably, she considered this random draw off the waiting list by another charter
a triumph, explaining that “everybody wanted to have kids in charter schools, but they just don’t have the opportunity because of the lotto,” adding her concern that “not everybody win the same way I win.” Similarly, both Delphine and Michael – satisfied charter parents - told stories about other parents who were waiting lists for years, and expressed that they felt “lucky” and “fortunate” to have had their children selected in a charter lottery.

Patricia was one of those parents who were never selected by a charter lottery. Her experience applying for a kindergarten seat in four charter lotteries and being waitlisted at each was the main conflict in her school choice story. After receiving waiting list confirmations, she remembered thinking to herself:

– What am I supposed to do with that? Am I supposed to keep it and hope and pray that she’ll get into the school if some person, 61 people before her say, no. People who were called say they don't want to go. I can't hope for that to happen. I have to put her somewhere, I have to be practical, I can't wait until September and say, "Oops, they didn't call me." Then I’d be scrambling to put her into school.

She described her experience of physically attending a lottery as “hard” and complained that it took a long time for the charters to let her know that her daughter was even on waiting lists.

Describing what she perceived as the “unfair part about charter schools,” she outlined a scenario wherein parents continually go down in rank of school preference with every charter rejection and asked: “how many times do you have to get yourself disappointed before your child is able to go to a school?” Remembering being “all over the place thinking that she was going to get in to at least one [charter] school,” she also missed a parochial scholarship application deadline because she was playing the waiting game with charters. Eventually she enrolled her daughter in a parochial school, only to be told a seat in one of the
charters had opened up. However, while charters were her first preference, by that time she had already invested in parochial uniforms, tuition, and registration fees. Reflecting on this experience, like at least one other parent in the sample, she believed that random selection was unfair and that charter selection should be merit-based, selecting “the best candidate[s]” and contrasted what she perceives as “ridiculous” level of competition and “nil” odds for being selected in charter lotteries with the relative ease of enrolling students in parochial or neighborhood public schools where students are enrolled on the spot.

Similar to Patricia, Jasmine – whose child attended a G&T program and independent schools – explained that, in addition to the relative nascence of charter schools, the lottery process also repelled her from considering them as an option. She remembered receiving phone calls informing her about the opportunity to apply for several charter lotteries and asking: “What happens if I don’t get in the lottery? What do I do with my kid then?” She also complained that she did not hear about lotteries until a time very close to the application deadlines and described the chance that her children would not be selected, thus attend the neighborhood public school, as being “very, very scary.” Essentially, she perceived charter lotteries as “throwing my child's education up to chance” and was concerned that everybody in her neighborhood could enter the lottery, explaining she was “too apprehensive to get in the pool.” Explaining that she is not a “risk-taker,” she decided not to include charters in her choice set, instead fighting for a seat in a G&T program then an elite independent school that were both located in predominately White and affluent neighborhoods. Similarly, when asked if she could think of parents who had made different choices than her own, Beverly
referred to neighbors who had the capital necessary to afford private tuition precisely because “they don’t want to deal with the lottery.”

Parents engaging in public school choice incurred racialized costs related to the perceived paucity of quality neighborhood public schools. They perceived engagement in a sometimes ongoing and iterative process of choice as a necessity, not an option. The eleven parents who experienced school mobility incurred both personal and professional costs, with some parents feeling unable to balance these responsibilities with full-time work. Parents also experienced the brunt side of the market principle of supply and demand, feeling anxious and frustrated that their children’s access to charters was left entirely up to the chance of being selected in a lottery. The stories shared in this section demonstrate the weight of guilt, personal responsibility, uncertainty and worry that parents shoulder in competitive school choice markets where seats in quality schools are scarce and competition is high because so many parents are trying to use public choice to escape their neighborhood public schools. Further, they demonstrated that choosing is not a finite act, as many parents found themselves unhappy with the school they chose and leaving to choose another school as the only recourse. These are expected consequences of market-based reforms, and they call into question whether the costs to parents and their families are worth the presumed benefits. The section that follows extends this analysis with an overview of the racialized constraints parents encountered when market-based reforms did not function appropriately.

**Market Dysfunction and Racialized Constraints**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, James (2013) rejects the colorblind pretense of school choice policy, arguing instead that parents of color encounter racialized
constraints to “genuine” choice caused by: a scarcity of proximal quality schools or reasonable alternatives, cultural deficit theories undergirding school missions and policies, and “trauma of racialized schooling experiences” (p.5). Chapters 4 and 5 have demonstrated that Black parents participating in this study overwhelmingly internalized the myth of public school crisis and perceived their neighborhood public schools as characterized by racial isolation, concentrated poverty, undisciplined students and parents, academic failure, under-qualified teachers, and inadequate curriculum and expectations. The analysis that follows will document the racialized constraints parents encountered while searching for, applying to, and attempting to retain their children within what they perceived as reasonable public alternatives to neighborhood public schools

*Charters as Unproven, Unresponsive, Unaccountable, and Unstable Public Options*

Charters were the most popular public school choice type in the sample, with fourteen of twenty parents including in their choice sets, and eleven winning a lottery and able to enroll at least one child in a charter at some point in their elementary school years. NYC charters disproportionately serve Black students because they are disproportionately located in predominately Black and low-income neighborhoods. Thus, the racialized constraints parents encountered when engaging with charters were a complex mix of access and issues of sustainability. While Chapter 5 detailed the rationale behind predominately low-income parents’ preference for charters and reasons for leaving charters, the section that follows will identify the various racialized constraints parents encountered whether considering charters, applying for a charter seat, or attempting to retain their children once enrolled. These charter-specific constraints include: the limited and mixed track record of a relatively
new charter system, cultural deficit theories of parental involvement, the practice of counseling- and pushing-out undesirable students, demographic shifts and parents’ aversion to concentrated poverty, and geographic instability. Each of these constraints will indicate ways in which market-based reform is not functioning for Black parents.

**New, Experimental Schools with Limited Track Records**

Market-based pressures are presumed to foster the development of innovative schools that promote academic excellence, yet some parents perceived the charter sector as nascent and unreliable, thus less than a reasonable alternative. Although many parents internalized dominant narratives of charters as quality schools because they are “like private” schools (see Chapter 4), they also expressed wariness about rapid charter proliferation and the relative nascence of the charter sector, ultimately preferring schools with proven track records of success and robust programming. When asked why they thought charters were popular, parents explained that charters are “shiny and new” and “the hot new thing” and warned that they may also be in developmental or experimental phases and lack records of positive impact precisely because they are new. These parents’ wary perceptions describe the reality of NYC’s charter sector. According to the New York City Charter School Center (2016), as of 2016 there are more charters (87) operating in their initial five-year charter than charters operating for 10 or more years (56) and fifteen charters have been closed.

As mentioned earlier, Patricia – who initially applied to several charters but was not selected and chose a parochial school instead – explained that Black parents are drawn to charters because they are “unique...new...and free,” but characterized charters in their current manifestation as unstable and unreliable. Reflecting on her experience of selecting charters,
she remembered feeling like she was randomly picking and choosing because “there’s no history...because they’re all brand new” and thinking to herself: “there’s no long term statistics that my child is going to do well in this school...[because] they haven’t been open long enough.” Expanding on her concern, she stated that it felt as if “you’re child is a lab rat, basically until they get it together.” Much of her perception of charters was shaped by learning about charter closures on the news and the aforementioned story of friend whose son attended a charter until it was closed. Contrasting herself with parents who “are giving charter schools a little bit of faith that they would do well for their child,” she was skeptical but hopeful that parents will eventually be able to choose between a charter and a public “based on the grades of the particular school,” positing that she might consider a charter that can demonstrate “their success are over a stable period of time” with a “graduating class...[and] test scores” in the future.

Similarly, after identifying “some really good” charters that she had heard of through word of mouth, Jasmine explained that she ultimately did not consider a charter for her oldest– who attended a G&T program and independent school – because she was “apprehensive and afraid because of the newness.” Explaining her reason for eliminating charters from her choice set, she shared: “I didn’t want to finally get him someplace and then go, ‘Ugh. This is not really working out to be what I thought it could be’” and have to move her child. (Unfortunately, this is what happened with his G&T program.) She described her preference for a school “that has a proven track record of...how they handled their children in a traditional fashion and move them along and their success rate.” However, while her youngest was not yet school-age, she conceded that she is willing to “broaden the scope [of
options] a little bit more” because her daughter is “far more artistic” and a “different learner” and because some of the schools that she researched for her son, including charters, have “five more years under the belt.”

Even Deborah - who was very unsatisfied with the neighborhood-zoned public school her two children attended and seemed desperate to find an alternative - expressed wariness about charters. She conceded that she would “try” charters, but she was concerned about them as an option because parents want the schools they enroll their children in “to count for something,” likening her preference for a strong school reputation to the status earned by “tell[ing] somebody what college you went to.” She explained: “When a charter school is brand new, that’s what their harder time is, they got to make it sound like it’ll be around forever.” Like others, she also perceived charters as unstable and unreliable and preferred “not to keep switching my child[ren].” Further, Sandra – whose child attended a district-zoned school and who never considered charters – told a story about researching charters and finding that they “have to perform, if they didn’t perform, then they just bring in a new administration, change the name of it and within five years start all over again.” Critiquing this perceived instability, she echoed Patricia’s concern about her child being used a “lab rat” in charter experiments by describing charters as “basically testing out a program on children.”

Unlike the parents mentioned above, Amina’s youngest attended a charter, yet she shared similar concerns. Although she was satisfied with her son’s elementary experience, she worried about his anticipated transition to the charter’s middle school precisely because it was a “new school” with “maybe three or four years” of students, so it was “unknown” to her.
Similarly, Ebenita, whose three children attended a charter she is satisfied with, also expressed concerns about nascent charters. She explained that her first impression of charters was that they “seemed a bit unstable because you would hear about one that seemed like it was the best thing ever and before you know it, it was closed down and these kids were displaced, again.” In her impression, a lot of charters had “a lot of hopefulness and big dreams and things that sound great on paper” but failed “operationally” to the detriment of students. Explaining that this led her to have “mixed feelings” about charters, she argued that “it’s best to see the track record of them, because there’s a new one popping up with a new theme, every year, or more,” adding her belief that evidence of a balanced budget or surplus was also important. Noting that not all charters were the same, she used these criteria to select a charter from a “higher standard” charter school network that her children were enrolled in.

Cultural Deficit Theories of Parental Involvement

Market-based pressures are also presumed to make schools more responsive and accountable to parents; however, parents’ stories about involvement and advocacy within “no excuses” charters suggest that parental liberty and power were limited to the ability to choose, opportunity to support the charter, and ability to leave when unsatisfied. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, parents conceptualized private and charter schools as attracting more motivated parents and contrasted them with uninvolved and unaccountable parents of children in neighborhood public schools. In Chapter 5 Ebenita celebrated the “no excuses” charter her children attended for forcing parents to “pick up the work” and be involved in their children’s schooling, describing a level of communication from the school that was
“insane” and a school environment that she found to be more welcoming and inviting to her than the neighborhood zoned public school her children had attended. However, Ebenita also was unique in that she had no critique of her children’s charter and that she dedicated a good amount of her interview time to defending her charter from the critiques of other charter parents who she empathetically perceived as unhappy and powerless because they saw no other reasonable alternatives.

Parents like Cynthia, Amber, and Margaret conflicted who with charter staff and voiced concerns about curriculum or discipline as advocates for their children were often made to feel ostracized and powerless. In contrast to Ebenita who appreciated that her charter made parents be involved, Margaret described the top-down and punitive charter-parent relationship at her “no excuses” charter as “equal opportunity disempowerment,” explaining that she disagreed with the charter’s policies but felt that she had no choice but to “humble myself and continue with it until I voted with my feet.” In her experience, parental involvement in the “no excuses” charter was compliance, while involvement in the popular progressive out-of-zone school her children later attended involved making the most of parents’ “professional skills and energy” to make the school a “more robust place.” In other words, while the charter’s concept of predominately Black parental involvement was deficits-based, the diverse progressive out-of-zone public school serving more racially and socioeconomically mixed parents was assets-based. Speaking from an outsider’s perspective, Daphne – whose children attended an independent school but had initially considered charters and had researched charters for family members and as a concerned community member – echoed Margaret’s concern in characterizing charters as “bullying”
predominately Black parents and discouraging involvement, paraphrasing her perception of charter messaging to parents as the following: “Pick-up [your children] from the curb, we don’t really want to engage you. When we call you, you’d better come.”

Parents perceived that charters found their advocacy efforts to be problematic and disruptive. Both Amber and Cynthia felt that that charters that were resolutely unresponsive to their concerns and requests and openly hostile to them after their advocacy continued regardless. Cynthia's negative experience with fruitlessly advocating for special needs supports and services in her son's charter led her to describe a distinction between parents “who could tolerate a charter school and just follow that line they want you to follow” and parents like herself “who just won’t” and end up feeling compelled to exit. Despite the logic that market-forces make schools more accountable to parents, Cynthia believed that when parents “try to make a ripple” in charters, charters will “put them out right away, or they will find a reason for them to get out.” Amber had a similar experience-based perspective, arguing that charter parents “can’t have too much opinion because [charters] basically...run their own game.”

It is important to note that these parents’ negative and disempowering experiences advocating for their children within charters are only dissimilar to public schools in the sense that the common response to their critiques can be paraphrased as: You chose to be here. You knew what you were getting into and we are what we are. If you are unhappy, then you can also choose to leave. In fact, this charter messaging is so prevalent that both Ebenita and Michael echoed it in responding to other parents’ critiques of their charters. Thus, instead of conceptualizing parent power as working to change the supposedly consumer-responsive
charter from within, they conceptualized parent power as the right and ability to vote in and out of schools with one’s feet.

Finally, parents also spoke of the ways that charter parental involvement differed from their previous experiences or that of other public schools, with parent governance committees like the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) replaced with parental involvement events like information sessions run by the charter. For instance, Michael explained that his son’s “no excuses” charter’s equivalent to a PTA was “kind of run differently” in that “it’s not ran by the parents (sic).” He explained that the charter hosts “faculty-organized events” for parents like math, reading, and movie nights where parents learn how to engage children in home learning activities, adding that while parents are encouraged to decorate or bring refreshments, these are completely faculty-organized events. He contrasted this with his childhood experiences where his parents were very involved in his schooling and active on PTA where they had a “voice” and made school-level decisions. Despite this critique, he said he understood the logic of the charter’s approach to involvement, explaining that his son’s “no excuses” charter “want[s] to control everything that happens in that environment for the children” because it was “dealing with so many different parents.” He reasoned that the charter’s choice to “just act in that small little group to execute things” instead of trying to come to democratic consensus across cultural and socioeconomic differences was more efficient.

**Counseling- and Pushing-out**

Although market-pressures are supposed to make schools more responsive to consumers, Cynthia, Amber, and Sandra told stories about the commonly documented practice of
charters counseling- or pushing-out difficult to serve students. Research has identified troubling charter trends of systematic under-enrollment of students with special needs, disproportionate rates of voluntary or forced attrition for students with special needs, and disproportionate suspension rates (Gabor, 2014; Domanico, 2015; Decker, et.al, 2015). As outlined earlier in this chapter, Cynthia believed that her special needs son was effectively pushed-out of his charter because the charter refused to provide him with special needs supports and services and that he was counseled-out after testing poorly on a placement exam by another charter. Reflecting on these experiences, she imagined a White charter administrator reasoning:

“Ok, we only want this type of Black child, but your type, we don't want. You see, if he's special, we don't want him. If he's a problem, we don't want him. If he's not easy to mold and follow the way we want him to go, we don't want him.”

She conceptualized this as a “divide and conquer” approach where charter leaders are “playing with the race internally...like kind of pawns in a chess game,” preferring students who are “good and...going to get me somewhere...the good test scores” over students who are going to “bring us down.” This speaks to the perverse incentives to push- or counsel-out special needs students created by high-stakes pressures on public schools to demonstrate strong test performance.

As documented in Chapter 5 and in the earlier analysis of the racialized costs of choice, Amber’s youngest son was suspended from school an alarming twelve times during 3rd grade. She believed that the school was punishing both her and her son for advocating for him through disproportionate suspension rates and constant calls about his behavior until
they were eventually pushed-out. Instead of market-based pressures making charters more responsive to parents, both Amber and Cynthia found charters to be hostile towards them and resistant to work with and serve their children. In other words, the charters did not care if these parents voted with their feet; instead, they seemed to compel them to do so.

While Cynthia and Amber experienced being pushed- or counseled-out of their respective charters, Sandra related a story about the negative impact of charter school push-outs on her daughter’s district zoned public school. Like Margaret, she chose a public school only to have it be negatively affected by charters. She explained that her daughter’s 1st grade class started the year with 24 students in September and had 30 students by April, believing that the new children “more than likely pushed out of the charter system and were forced to go to their public school.” She was frustrated that “a charter school can dismiss a student at any point” while “a public school does not have the option to do that” because this was detrimental to student achievement, given that they serve all of the “untouchables.” Relatedly, she was also concerned about the detrimental impact of push-outs on public school funding, arguing that public schools only receive per-pupil funding at the beginning of the year and operate at a deficit with such transfers because charters retain per-pupil funding after pushing students out. Connecting this with the scarcity of quality public schools, she imagined a dystopian future school system with “one public school where all the bad kids are and everything else is going to be charter” because public schools performed poorly on tests as a result of inadequate funding and having to serve students with the greatest needs.

Demographic Shifts and Aversion to Concentrated Poverty
Another way charters were perceived to be unresponsive to consumers, rendering parents to feel powerless to do anything other than leave, was in changes in enrollment policy over the course of time that led to changes in student demographics. Margaret’s reasons for preferring then leaving the “no excuses” charter her oldest attended were analyzed in Chapter 5. In relation to her issues with the “back-to-basics” academics and the “no excuses” disciplinary model, she also shared that her satisfaction waned because the charter had “flipped their model” of enrollment so that parents had “a better chance of getting in if you have all these risk factors,” noting that the “average age of the moms dropped by about 15 years” as a result. She argued that this change in enrollment policy revealed the charter’s “true target, which is the back-to-basics inner city.” Similarly, speaking from her middle-class standpoint, she argued that charters “pull from this wide geographic base, so once you’re in it, you see that’s that not advantageous, but you don’t know that when you’re not in it.” In both statements, she expressed concerns that the charter was actively recruiting and targeting programming towards children from less affluent families and neighborhoods to the detriment of her middle-class son. This echoes a theme that emerged in Chapter 5, wherein middle-class and affluent families saw the necessity of cultural deficit theory driven academic programming for low-income families but were offended and repelled by the charter’s generalization of cultural deficit across all of its families, including their own. This also echoes a theme that emerged in Chapter 4, wherein parents perceive choice as a means of avoiding concentrated poverty.

**Geographic Instability**
Relatedly, parents also found that they had no control over charter relocations. Yvonne’s charter school story reveals an aversion to concentrated poverty in charters that is similar to Margaret combined with the issue of the geographic instability of NYC charters created by limited state funding for rent and utilities and a scarcity of school real estate in NYC. Because Yvonne’s oldest attended all parochial schools, she struggled with finding a quality public school for her second child. The first of two choices for her second child, Yvonne enrolled her son in a charter that she was initially excited about because it was close to her home and seemed similar to the parochial schools that she and her oldest had attended. However, before the school year began, she received a letter informing her that the charter would be moving from its original location to co-locate inside a public school building located far from her home and inside a building that “I would not have sent my kids to because it’s a block away from Marcy Projects.” However, the charter moved and she reluctantly kept her son enrolled in it.

Explaining her aversion to the new location, she shared that the public school sharing the building had a “culture did not support my beliefs or my philosophies.” Providing examples of this schism, she shared stories about an inappropriate sexual encounter in the bathroom with a child from the other school and a holiday recital where “three separate arguments [between parents] break out because people are standing up but people can’t see.” Reflecting on her reaction to other Black parents fighting during the recital, she said, “I’m a Brownsville girl, I got what that’s about, but that’s not our family culture,” then made the case that tensions about education are rooted in “class issues” as much as they are in race. In other words, she saw her family as having more cultural capital than the families of children
in the public school. She remembered being on “pins and needles until June” while she recommenced the school search. Reflecting on this experience, she posited that she probably would’ve kept her child in the charter and enrolled her youngest as well had the charter remained in its original location. Instead, the charter’s geographic instability and the demographic shifts created by its move compelled her to leave.

Delphine – an immigrant from the Ivory Coast whose child was a kindergartner in a “no-excuses” charter – also encountered geographic instability. She was satisfied with her daughter’s charter that was located outside of her Brownsville neighborhood in the relatively diversifying neighborhood of Bed Stuy. However, one of the few concerns she voiced about the charter was that the 4th-8th grade classes were planned to co-locate inside a public school building that is “not in the best area” because there was only room in their current building up to 3rd grade. She explained that she and other parents were concerned because this new building is located “really inside the projects” and recalled a father saying that he would not allow his daughter to visit his family who lived in those projects because there is often gun violence in the middle of the day. Conceding that she has “years to go” before having to make a decision as the mother of a 1st grader, she shared that parents with older children in the school were engaged in a fight with the charter about the new location. While Delphine perceived charters as a means of escaping Brownsville’s concentrated poverty and its related neighborhood effects, like Yvonne, she found that limited budgets for rent and real estate scarcity led to unstable and mutable charter locations that may eventually compel her to change schools.
Amina referred to a similar concern about her 4th grader's charter only having enough room in their current building for grades K-4, a model that is unlike the majority of NYC elementary schools that serve grades K-5. She was anxious about potentially having to find an alternative 5th grade class for him followed quickly by middle school choice because she is “against the moving of children more than necessary.” She spoke of the social pressure not to openly seek alternatives to the charter’s 5-8 middle schools or discuss the possibility of leaving the charter within the close-knit parent community at the charter because the social “expectation is that the fifth grade is still a part of the elementary school, and so, we will move.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Margaret enrolled her children in a progressive out-of-zone public school after pulling her oldest from a “no excuses” charter only to have a middle school charter from the same charter management network co-locate its school building the very same year. In contrast to the charter her son attended that had used its own resources to purchase and renovate their own building, she perceived the middle school charter that co-located her children’s new public school building as “usurping public space” and engaging in a “real estate grab.” After expending her time and energy in choosing three different elementary schools for her son, she found herself deeply involved in a struggle to keep the charter out of their building through actions such as serving the charter papers, attending and speaking at public hearings about the co-location, and advising her principal based on what she new about the network and had covertly learned about the charter. As a result of these experiences, she perceived the DOE as failing to be an “impartial judge” in this and
other co-location decisions because “they've stated publicly [that] they favor the charter schools.”

Constrained Access to Gifted & Talented Programs and Seats

As mentioned earlier, while some charter advocacy efforts would have the public believe otherwise, charters are not the only public alternative that parents considered and applied to. The second most popular public school choice in this sample, nine parents identified Gifted & Talented (G&T) programs as part of their elementary school choice sets, conceptualizing them as an alternative to neighborhood public schools. However, only three parents enrolled children in a G&T program with two quickly pulling their children out because the programs proved unsustainable. Ultimately, whether their children attended a G&T program or not, all parents who expressed G&T preferences encountered racialized geographic constraints related to testing and program access that are examined below. In all cases, parents experienced equality of opportunity to choose, but significant inequity of access.

Testing

Designed as a merit-based means of supporting the “needs of exceptional students” through “accelerated, rigorous, and specialized instruction” (NYC DOE), NYC G&T programs are often critiqued for disproportionately serving White, Asian, and higher-income students (Roda, 2016; Fleisher and Hollander, 2013; Baker, 2013). Critics of the NYC G&T system argue that the standardized testing process and content privileges more affluent children and parents. G&T testing stories confirm this critique, citing issues with the assessment and inequitable testing locations (Baker, 2013; Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008).
Ebenita - low-income mother of three - attended a neighborhood G&T program through middle school and her experience was so positive that G&T was her primary preference when she began the school choice process. While she had taken a school’s independent test to gain admittance as a child, she applied for G&T seats for her children after the Bloomberg administration’s 2008 centralization of admissions procedures and use of citywide standardized assessments and percentile cutoffs in an effort to make G&T placement more equitable (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008). These polices were intended to promote fairness and transparency but have had the unintended effect of increasing the percentage of eligible students from NYC’s wealthiest districts and reducing the percentage from poorest districts since their implementation (Gootman and Gebeloff, 2008; Otterman, 2011; Harris, 2016).

Relatedly, unlike her childhood experience of school-specific G&T admissions policies, Ebenita found herself having to engage in a “bureaucratic process” and make her children sit for “over-standardized tests.” Preparing her children for the assessment, she noted a “discrepancy” between the “standards and expectations” that she experienced as a student in a G&T school and what was expected of her children. She attempted to address them by “buying curriculums of the year ahead” and teaching her children over the summer, all the while thinking to herself: “this is not good, this is not good.”

Furthermore, she described the G&T testing experience as “absolutely nightmarish,” explaining that getting to the closest test location required her to take her kindergartener and 1st grader on two different buses “super far, way out of our neighborhood” early in the morning during a snowstorm. In her estimation, the extensive travel and the experience of testing in an unfamiliar school environment was detrimental to her children’s performance.
on the high-stakes test. Margaret – a middle-class parent of two - related a similar story, explaining that her son “had to be dragged an hour into Brooklyn at some hot sweaty school and did very poorly.” In both cases, these mothers were concerned that their children's test performance was compromised by the distant location of G&T testing centers. Other parents cited issues with navigating the G&T test application process in the first place, explaining that they did not know about deadlines until they had passed, or that they had missed an integral part of the application paperwork and their children had missed the opportunity as a result.

Program Location and Disparities

Parents who surpassed the racialized and socioeconomic hurdle of children passing the standardized test experienced different constraints related to their children's scores, as those in the 97th percentile and above have the choice from the five citywide G&T programs with available seats while those in the 90th percentile and above are delimited to choosing from programs within their school district. In addition to testing constraints, parents also encountered constrained access to citywide and district seats and encountered divided and unequal programming within schools. G&T program locations area significant issue in NYC. NYCDOE did not make an effort to ensure that every school district in NYC had a G&T program until 2016 (Harris, 2016), and G&T programs are disproportionately across districts and inversely related to charter concentration. According to a 2016 InsideSchools.org search, Brooklyn districts characterized by low numbers of Black residents had the highest numbers of elementary G&T programs and relatively low numbers of elementary charters:

- District 20 had the most G&T programs with 7 (25%) and 0 charters;
• District 22 had 5 (18%) G&T programs and 4 charters;

• District 15 - which encompasses central Park Slope - had 3 G&T programs and 3 charters.

The racialized geographic constraints of access to G&T programs is even more evident when comparing the numbers above with that of elementary charters and G&T programs in the districts encompassing the Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where these parents reside:

Table 15. G&T and charter distribution in central Brooklyn neighborhoods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSDs</th>
<th>Central Brooklyn Neighborhoods</th>
<th>G&amp;T 2016-2017</th>
<th>Charters 2016-2017</th>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brownsville, Ocean Hill</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Located in Brooklyn</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
<td><strong>85</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Percentage</strong></td>
<td><strong>28%</strong></td>
<td><strong>81%</strong></td>
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Note: Gifted and Talented data from InsideSchools.org (2016); Charter data from New York City Department of Education Charter School Directory (2016)

Importantly, some CSDs like 13 encompass multiple neighborhoods, thus it is important to note that the 3 G&T programs in 13 are actually located in more affluent and racially mixed neighborhoods outside of Bed Stuy.
Accessing G&T program seats proved to be a significant issue for parents, with parents putting their children through the testing experience only to find scarce proximal programs and seats in other districts where programs are concentrated. Nailah explained that as soon as her children were “age ready” she had them tested, explaining: “I know that if they were going to be in a particular school, then if they were under the umbrella of the Gifted program then there’s just a different nuance there.” They passed the test in the district-level percentile, yet there were no G&T programs in her district when it came time to choose schools for her children in their predominately Black district so she used variance to access seats in a progressive public school located in a relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhood instead.

Ebenita’s oldest scored in the district-level percentile as well, so they were restricted to the choice of one public school with a G&T program in her district that she described as “far worse than their zoned school.” Having the “beyond discouraging” realization that “it’s almost null and void that you’re Gifted & Talented when you live in a certain neighborhood,” she expanded her search by visiting and calling public schools with G&T programs in a Whiter and relatively more affluent neighborhood. She remembered one of those school’s staff members relating the following repellent implied message to her: “You’re Black or you’re poor, you’re not from around here” and “This is a private party.” After a failed search she eventually enrolled her oldest in the district G&T program only to pull her out during the first week of kindergarten because she was disappointed with the teacher who had been hired with short notice. In other words, she faced racialized and classed barriers to G&T programs in other districts and quickly found the only G&T program in her district to be
unsustainable. Reflecting on her negative experience with G&T testing and program access, she stated: “Really it was to no avail, all of it, even though she tested into it.” Ebenita highlighted the irony that while she had simultaneously been applying to charters, she:

actually had more hopes in the G&T program because I felt it would be more selective because only students that are testing into it would be eligible for it, as opposed to every single person in New York City applying for a lottery.

Instead, she reluctantly sent her children to their neighborhood-zoned public school, continuing to apply for charter lotteries until one was selected in a charter lottery. By the time her oldest was already in 5th grade.

On the other hand, Margaret’s youngest tested at the citywide level; however, there were no citywide openings so she enrolled her in a progressive public school outside of her zone and district. Additionally, while Michael’s son also scored at the citywide level, he found that “good schools were too far away in Manhattan” and that there were no seats in schools located in relatively Whiter and more affluent Brooklyn neighborhoods. As a result, he enrolled his son in a “no excuses” neighborhood charter.

Jasmine described her experience of transferring her son from a G&T program in Florida to another in Brooklyn after moving back to care for her father as “horrific” because of the paucity of seats in Whiter and more affluent neighborhoods. She remembered resorting to “pushing and shoving,” calling and physically showing up at the DOE and schools to get him into one of those preferred G&T programs. Unlike Ebenita, the G&T programs located in relatively affluent and White neighborhoods that she visited told her they had seats but that she had to go through the system to access them. Knowing this, she apprehensively felt that
the NYCDOE was only offering her G&T seats in schools where “you have to cross from Park Slope and the other neighborhoods and the demographic is what it is.” In saying this, she implied that the DOE was trying to deny her Black son a seat in a G&T program located within a Whiter more affluent school and push her towards programs in schools with more concentrated poverty and students of color. After a protracted and difficult fight to access a seat in one of her preferred G&T programs, she pulled him out because he was bullied by a child from the general academic track and she was frustrated that school leadership did not protect him by keeping the tracks completely separate. She then recommenced the search, now for elite independent school scholarships, reasoning: "Okay, now, you know, I went as high up the public school chain as I thought I could go."

Jasmine’s preference for gifted and general tracks to be completely separate and distinct from each other speaks to the final G&T equity issue identified by parents. In addition to issues with testing and the locations of tests and programs, G&T programs are also critiqued for “reinforcing the negative stereotype of class and race” within school buildings by separating children by testing ability, thus creating “castes within schools, [with] one offered an education that is enriched and accelerated, [and] the other getting a bare-boned version of the material” (Baker, 2013). Speaking to this issue, Yvonne’s school choice stories for her second and third child provided a striking contrast between the G&T program and the general academic track within the same school. After an extensive search she pulled her son out of a charter and enrolled him in an out-of-zone public school located in a predominately affluent and White neighborhood where he was placed in the G&T program. She described his class as containing 12 students with strong social bonds whose parents had similar
“values” and strong communication. While her son completed elementary school with this cohort, she had a “vastly different” experience within the same school with her youngest, who did not test well and was placed in the school’s general track. In contrast to her experience with the school’s G&T program, her youngest child’s general classroom experiences were characterized by unqualified teachers, a lack of discipline, and scant parent involvement. Among other issues with the school, the inequitable dichotomy of G&T and general academic tracks eventually compelled Yvonne to pull her youngest out and recommence the choice process.

These parents’ stories about racialized constraints encountered with G&T testing and program access and Yvonne’s split experience in the same school with different children serves as an important reminder that parents’ school choice preferences, choices, and experiences in NYC are also shaped by a number of factors including: whether a family is aware of and is able to access testing, what kind of testing environment they encounter, whether their child tests well, what scores their child receives, the number of G&T programs in their district, and parents’ ability to access scarce seats in highly competitive choice markets outside of their neighborhoods and districts. While parents conceptualized G&T programs as a necessary refuge from neighborhood public schools, G&T testing policy, complex bureaucratic processes, and the racialized geographic location of test centers and programs restricted their ability to actualize their preferences. Their stories of constrained access add necessary nuance to the dominant narrative of charter school demand exceeding supply and of racialized geographic constraints that need to be addressed through policy.

*A Paucity of Diverse Schools and Diverse Choices*
Finally, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, parents across the sample were frustrated by their lack of access to diverse schools and middle-class parents were frustrated with the paucity of progressive public school options in their neighborhoods. Markets are assumed to foster innovation, yet parents found that the charter proliferation in their Black neighborhoods fostered racially segregated schools with concentrated poverty and failed to promote the curricular and pedagogical diversity they desired. Parents generally conceptualized diversity as access to Whiteness and necessary dominant cultural capital training for college, careers, and global citizenship. However, they struggled to actualize their strong preference for diversity within the context of NYC, one of the most diverse cities in the world with some of the highest levels of residential and school segregation nationwide (Hertz, 2014; Kuscera and Orfield, 2014). Specifically, low-income parents were often unable to access racially integrated public schools for their children. Facing the hindrance of severe residential and school segregation and seeking refuge from underperforming neighborhood public schools, they often compromised their strong preference for diversity in exchange for charters’ promise of academic excellence. On the other hand, middle-class parents were able to access such schools, yet this was after incurring the costs of school mobility and enrolling children in geographically distant schools.

Middle-class parents were repelled by the racially and socioeconomically isolated neighborhood public schools and “no excuses” charters concentrated in their neighborhoods, and they expressed frustration with the lack of proximal diverse and progressive public schools to choose from. While they accessed progressive schools using variances and social networks to access seats in progressive public schools or by paying independent school
tuition, they were disappointed with the lack of proximal progressive public schools to choose from and the cultural deficit theory they perceived as undergirding this scarcity. For instance, asked her response to research findings that charters exacerbate racial segregation, Margaret responded that she was concerned with "bigger problems than that," explaining:

> I think the fact that there's a high concentration of charter schools and no other innovative school models in low-income districts, why not replicate some successful progressive schools? Why not replicate some other types of charter schools? Why always this that's a monopoly? That's not for everybody. I think that's a bigger problem. I don't have a problem with all-Black schools and all-Black and Latino schools. I have a problem with the lack of diversity in approaches, a lack of diversity of the staff, lack of diversity in replicating best practices across a school district to find out what works.

Echoing Margaret's framing of the problem and solution, other middle-class parents expressed a desire for a more robust choice market within their neighborhoods. Referencing their knowledge of quality public schools serving predominately White and affluent students, they expressed a need for the NYCDOE to recognize the socioeconomic diversity in their neighborhoods and diversify school markets in their districts accordingly.

**Discussion**

This chapter began by framing choice as an iterative process for parents who made more than one elementary choice for at least one child. School mobility was a striking theme in this study, with eleven parents enrolling at least one child in two or more different elementary schools. Of those eleven, nine enrolled a child in three or more and two in a striking five different elementary schools. This finding reveals the potential for urban parents of color to experience choice as an iterative and ongoing public school choice process.
involving the hidden labor of: researching, applying for, and being selected by and/or choosing a school; advocating for children within increasingly untenable schools of choice in an effort to maintain stability for children; deciding to exit unsustainable schools of choice; and recommencing the search and application process. Documenting parents’ school mobility stories provides a much more robust understanding of their experiences and decisions than studies that compare and contrast “choosers” and “non-choosers” or that conceptualize school choice as a single decision such as studies of “charter school parents.” This study challenges these overly simplistic categories and frames school choice as a process for parents of color.

Parents’ stories of school mobility were documented in this chapter to identify the racialized costs Black parents and families incurred while engaging in elementary public school choice. Importantly, these costs were incurred in a functioning market premised on competition for scarce of quality schools and parents’ right to choose and leave schools at their will. Parents who experienced elementary school mobility were aware of the negative effects on their children, yet felt compelled to exit unsustainable schools they had chosen, and did so reluctantly. Internalizing the dominant narrative of engaging in choice as good parenting and understanding their children’s academic achievement as a product of their educational choices, they shouldered the emotional weight of guilt and personal responsibility for making unsustainable choices and for disrupting their children’s education through exit. Moreover, they exited the schools only after expending considerable time and effort advocating for their children in hopes of avoiding or deferring exit. During the ongoing and iterative choice process parents incurred abstract costs such as sacrifices of time, energy, and personal well-
being as well as tangible professional costs, with several mothers feeling compelled to leave or limit work in order to effectively manage the iterative school choice process and the demands created by choice including extensive travel and irregular schedules.

Parents also incurred racialized costs in applying for charters and through the experience of charter lotteries and waiting lists. Black parents’ charter lottery and waiting lists stories represent a significant facet of racialized costs for Black parents since charters are disproportionately concentrated in Black neighborhoods. While random selection is intended to be fairest way to distribute scarce opportunities in a competitive choice market, parents apprehensively perceived lotteries as rigged or unfair, remembered them as an anxiety ridden and destabilizing process, and rightly questioned why their efforts to access a seat in what has been marketed to them as the only quality public school option should be left up to random chance. Their stories of racialized psychological and professional costs incurred in a functioning choice market beg the question of whether the costs are worth the benefits of providing equal opportunity to choose schools.

Moreover, parents’ stories also revealed racialized constraints with charters, G&T programs, and diverse and progressive schools – indicating aspects of market-based reforms that are not functioning for Black parents. First, competitive market forces are presumed to foster academic excellence and innovation, yet parents apprehensively perceived them as a relatively nascent and experimental schools with unreliable track records. Moreover, competitive market-forces are presumed to make schools more responsive and accountable to consumers yet this was not the case for many parents. Parents found that power and involvement in “no excuses” charters was delimited to a cultural deficit model of choosing,
supporting, and leaving the charter when unsatisfied. Two parents experienced being pushed or counseled-out of charters and another noted the negative effects that this common charter practice has had on her district-zoned public school. Other parents related their frustration with changing admissions policies and locations related to their aversion to concentrated poverty. Finally, instead of market-based forces promoting innovation and consumer-responsiveness, the “no excuses” model was perceived as having a monopoly in Black neighborhoods and middle-class parents were frustrated with the perceived presumption of “cultural deficit” and the lack of diversity of educational models in their neighborhoods.

Further, while parents experienced equality of opportunity to choose other public schools of choice, they did not experience equity of access. This was clear in parents’ strong preference for G&T programs and the racialized geographic constraints they experienced with G&T testing and programs. Even when families got over the hurdle of passing the assessment, parents experienced a paucity of available seats in G&T programs outside of their district and a scarcity of programs within their districts. Additionally, as documented in Chapter 5, parents across the sample expressed a strong preference for diverse schools and middle-class and affluent parents expressed strong preferences for progressive schools. High levels residential segregation by race and class and school zoning laws precluded parents’ access to diverse and progressive schools. Middle-class parents with more capital were able to navigate across district borders to access public schools with more diverse students bodies and progressive philosophies while lower-income parents with less capital compromised their strong preference for diversity for promises of academic excellence made by charters or
struggled in racially- and class-isolated neighborhood public schools. Parents’ frustrated preferences for G&T programs, diverse schools, and progressive schools are also revealed necessary nuance to the dominant narrative about Black parents’ high demand for charters in indicating that many parents look to charters as a last or additional public refuge from neighborhood public schools, and often after they have experienced racialized constraints to accessing seats in other public schools of choice.

These findings demonstrate that it is erroneous and deceiving to frame Black parents living in Brooklyn as empowered individuals exercising their right to liberty in an equitable and colorblind educational market. Instead, it is vital that school choice for urban families of color be conceptualized as compelled and reactive acts of tactful and rational subaltern agency in an educational market contorted by the effects of race and racism. The racialized costs incurred and constraints encountered by these parents are not documented in this chapter as a refutation of choice itself, but as indicators of how educational policies intended to enhance racial educational equity through market-based reforms must be amended and refined so that parents of color and their families carry far less of the burden of choice and have equitable access to reasonable and sustainable public choices. This work must begin with concerted reform efforts to make neighborhood public schools reasonable and sustainable options and by incentivizing and supporting that diversification of educational models in Black urban neighborhoods.
Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the study, identifies main findings, and draws policy implications from them. Finally, the limitations of this study are identified and recommendations for future related research are made.

Summary of Study

Charter school proliferation has disproportionately affected Black urban neighborhoods and the debate about the relationship between racial educational equity and enhanced public school choice through charters has created dissension and discord in scholarship and across Black politics, educational organizing efforts, neighborhoods, and school communities. School choice research concerned with racial educational equity is too often delimited by advocacy or opposition frameworks, which tend to position Black parents engaging in market-based for of choice like charters as either disempowered victims or dupes of a neoliberal policy agenda or as liberated and empowered agents of change continuing the radical legacy of the Black Nationalist and Black Power movements. Further, while market-based school choice policies like charters and vouchers position parents as rational decision makers and the success of choice as a public school reform strategy is highly dependent on their preferences and choices, parents’ perceptions of and experiences with choice are too rarely the focus of school choice research. Further, research that does focus on parents often does so with a myopic focus on one form of choice, such as charters, masking many parents’
complicated and nuanced preferences and experiences with a range of different forms of school choice.

Recognizing that there is a contest over the conflicting, though easily plausible, conceptions of school choice as a mechanism of racial educational equity, research needs to reveal and clarify the underlying value disputes related to school choice policy so that we can better understand the differences and possible paths towards some form of reconciliation (Stone, 2012). The primary purpose of this study was to identify disparities between the values and goals of schooling and school choice policy and the values, goals, and racialized experiences of Black parents engaging in school choice. To meet that end, each stage of analysis contrasted Black parents’ counter-narratives, which constitute an experience-based racial politics of school choice, with dominant narratives about choice and public schools. Further, the analysis identified common racialized challenges Black urban American parents confront, regardless of class or ethnicity, when engaging in elementary choice and compared and contrasted their diverse responses to these challenges to conceptualize a Black standpoint from which to perceive both the consequences and promise of school choice policy.

Moreover, because parents’ preferences and decisions are central to market-based reforms, policymakers, charter school leadership, researchers, and organizers have much to learn from parent-centered school choice research. School choice policies are increasingly shifting the power of and responsibility for enrolling children in schools from governments to parents. This study was designed to describe the consequences of that shift, the extent to which parents of color or low-income parents experience engaging in choice as equitable and empowering, and the effects of carrying that responsibility. Further, by eschewing
simplistic categories like “charter school parents” this study revealed sometimes shifting or frustrated preferences and choices of Black parents competing in a complex school choice marketplace where seats in quality schools are scarce and market-based reforms sometimes do not function as intended. Instead of developing an argument in support of or in opposition to school choice or charters, this study focused on understanding the consequences of over fifteen years of NYS charter school policy on Black central Brooklyn neighborhoods where charters are disproportionately concentrated and developing policy recommendations from Black parents’ standpoint.

This study was an interpretive policy analysis of the consequences of charter school policy as perceived by Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods where charter schools are disproportionately concentrated. The twenty families selected for participation in this study met the sample criteria of identifying as Black or African American, having at least one child enrolled in elementary school at the time of the interview, and residing in one of the six Community School Districts (CSDs) comprising the setting of this study. This purposeful sample is intentionally diverse regarding parents’ social class, ethnicity, and school choices, yet all parents shared the challenges of being racialized as Black and living in residentially segregated central Brooklyn neighborhoods with culturally devalued neighborhood public schools characterized by concentrated poverty and disproportionate numbers of charters.

In the literature school choice policy is framed as having three distinct and sometimes contradictory objectives, each with its own dominant narratives: school choice promotes the liberty and power of parents and schools over that of bureaucratic governance; school choice
is a post-civil rights means to promote racial educational equity; and school choice is a lever of academic achievement through competition created by market-based forces. Returning to debates about school choice and charters, research supporting and opposing each framing of choice was reviewed in order to document what is already known regarding the racial politics of school choice and to identify gaps. Finally, the conceptual framework for the study was introduced, with Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and cultural capital serving as the foundation strengthened for the purposes of this study with Collin’s (2009) concept of collective Black standpoint, Pedroni’s (2007) concept of “subaltern agency, and James’s (2013) framing of school choice as “racial subordination” for parents of color. Market-based school choice policies are driven by many values assumptions and this study provided a unique opportunity to assess the extent to which school choice has enhanced liberty and equity for parents of color and to identify areas in which the market-based reforms are inequitable or not functioning as intended.

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Black parents living in predominately low-income and racially segregated Black Brooklyn neighborhoods perceive and experience elementary school choice policy given the context of rapid charter school proliferation in their neighborhoods?

2. How has the introduction of more public school choices in their neighborhoods through charters shaped their elementary school preferences, choices, and experiences and how have parents perceived and experienced the opportunity to make more school choice decisions in an increasingly complex school choice marketplace?
3. How, if at all, do the variables of race, class, and geography influence parents’ school choice preferences, decisions, and behaviors within the context of a complex, rapidly changing, and highly segregated school system?

4. School choice has been framed as a mechanism of liberty and racial educational equity by policymakers and school choice advocates, but how do these intents and assumptions correspond with the perceptions and experiences of Black parents who have engaged in elementary school choice?

During 2012-2013 in-depth interviews lasting one to three hours were conducted with twenty parents in locations of their choice. On-going thematic narrative analysis examined how participants retrospectively interpreted their personal school choice preferences and experiences and how their school choice narratives drew upon, resisted, and/or transformed dominant narratives related to schooling and school choice policy. Thematic narrative analysis identified the common racialized challenges these Black parents faced and their diverse reactions to these challenges in order to identify policy issues to be addressed and to propose potential policy solutions from their standpoint.

While there is a good amount of school choice research about NYC high school choice policy, this study addressed a gap in school choice research by centering parents’ elementary school choice narratives. Relatedly, unlike many school choice studies that use simplistic binary categories like “charter school parent,” this study revealed parents’ complex and often shifting preferences and choices. Avoiding categorization of parents by their choices during analysis revealed that, for some parents, elementary school choice in Brooklyn was an ongoing and iterative process involving research, applications, choosing or being chosen,
advocacy for children within schools of choice in efforts to make them sustainable, choosing to leave, and recommending the process. For this reason, the analysis framed charters as inextricably linked to other forms of choice in a complex, rapidly changing, and racialized school choice marketplace and choice as a potentially iterative and ongoing process for parents of color that does not end with choosing a school.

This study also revealed intra-racial class-disparities and –disunion to be addressed as well as areas of mutual challenge and concern that can serve as a foundation of community-based organizing for racial educational equity. Black parents living in urban areas face the shared racialized challenges of residential segregation, the perceived urgent need to opt-out of their neighborhood public schools, and an inequitable public school choice marketplace.

**Main Findings**

Parents who participated in this study both internalized and subverted dominant narratives about public school crisis and engaging in choice as good parenting. As a result they discursively valued private over public schooling and associated charters and other forms of public schools of choice with private schools, perceiving them as parent-responsive institutions where parents are more invested. Importantly, while discursively valuing private schooling, they acknowledged a cultural hierarchy of public schools wherein culturally valued public schools like charters and traditional public schools located in relatively wealthier and Whiter neighborhoods had far more symbolic exchange value than public schools in their neighborhoods. Even parents who ultimately made private school choices for their children began with frustrated public school preferences and chose the route of private schooling only after being unable to access seats in culturally valued public
schools. This finding highlights the fact that the real issue at hand in the school choice and charter debates is the lack of investment and devaluation of neighborhood public schools in Black neighborhoods created by fiscal inequity and narratives of failure and crisis. Parents strongly perceived that policymakers had given up on their neighborhood public schools and had forsworn responsibility for them.

*Place Matters*

The most common and enduring racialized challenge parents shared was residential segregation. As Patrick Sharkey (2013) has argued, Black parents in this study faced a shared dilemma of transmitting racial inequality to their children through residency within or proximity to concentrated urban poverty created by and persisting from the ghettoization of Black Americans in the 1980s. This place-based dilemma impacted parents regardless of income and was also generational, as the majority of parents were raised by families that have resided in racially segregated Black NYC neighborhoods characterized by relatively less political capital and relatedly unaccountable public institutions with minimal resources for multiple generations. First and foremost, they perceived choice as a means of escape from neighborhood disadvantage related to concentrated urban poverty such as violence and what parents’ perceived as their low-income neighbors’ cultural poverty.

This finding is inconsistent with research findings that parents generally prefer schools located proximal to their homes (Teske, 2012) and is consistent with Bell’s (2007) findings that the “place-based” meanings parents associate with their own and other schools and neighborhoods are just as or more important than spatial considerations like time and distance. Parents perceive choice as a means to escape neighborhood disadvantage
regardless of the fact that policymakers and charter sector leaders have decided to concentrate charters, thus expand proximal public school choice options, in their neighborhoods. In fact, the relocation of charters from an initial neighborhood of parents’ choice to one with concentrated poverty and disadvantage was a major theme in parents’ charter narratives. Charter sector propensity to locate charters in or near areas of concentrated poverty was identified as a reason parents avoided certain charters or felt it necessary to pull their children out and seek alternatives.

The variable of geography also delimited parents’ access to schools of choice and/or caused them to incur considerable costs related to choice. Their experiences engaging in public school choice exemplify James’s (2013) framing of school choice for parents of color as “racial subordination” because it often “manifests as patterns of residential housing segregation” (James, 2013, p. 1093). After ruling out culturally stigmatized and devalued neighborhood public schools and facing racialized constraints when struggling to access seats in public schools of choice located in relatively affluent and Whiter neighborhoods, low-income parents generally chose charters. Some used charters as a means to escape their higher-poverty neighborhood for another Black neighborhood like Bed Stuy that is increasingly diversifying in terms of race, ethnicity, and class. Others were only selected in lotteries by charters located in other Black neighborhoods far from their homes. In all cases, low-income single mothers who enrolled their children in charters at some point in their elementary years spoke of the burden of travel on them and their children, yet conceived this racialized burden of choice as a necessary condition of good parenting given the context.

*The Generational Burden of School Choice as Good Parenting*
Parents have internalized the dominant narrative that responsibility for their children’s academic success lies with the school decisions they make. However, parents’ school choice values and beliefs are also generational in that they were developed as children who interpreted their parents’ financial investment in parochial school tuition or labor involved with navigating what was a much more limited public school choice system as good parenting and the inverse as poor parenting. Parents who attended parochial schools in NYC as children perceived them as a means of escape and their parents’ effort to protect and distinguish them from the “rough” children who attended public school. Significantly, they perceived their time in parochial school as an opportunity to attend an integrated school and benefit from a racially integrated school environment where they were able to acquire the dominant social and cultural capital they associated with what they called “diversity,” a term that was clearly proxy for Whiteness. These perceptions of the relation between choice and parenting and of the difference between private and public school students and families directly influenced their own preferences and perceptions of parenting as adults.

In all, as children and adults, parents perceived their neighborhood public schools as racially segregated and unresponsive institutions where poverty is concentrated and parents are not invested. In explaining one of the causes of what they perceived as public school crisis in their neighborhoods, parents framed private and public schools of choice parents as invested and involved and framed neighborhood public school parents as ignorant, unmotivated, entitled, and/or uninvolved. Relatedly, parents other public schools of choice outside of their neighborhoods and charters as akin to private schools, explaining that this was because they
were consumer-responsive institutions where parents have more control and more invested because they worked to get their child enrolled.

One of the major motivators in parents’ school choice stories was the objective to avoid social networks comprised of neighborhood and/or low-income public school parents and to join social networks of parents in culturally valued schools where parents have more capital. The objectified cultural capital acquired by parents through choice was clear in one mother’s preference for an elementary school with a strong reputation, reasoning that it was similar to the status and distinction acquired by attending certain colleges. As Ball and Vincent (1998) found, parents conceptualized school choice as a means to the acquisition of objectified cultural capital, perceiving private and public schools of choice as culturally valued cultural goods where they could enhance their and their children’s social status through membership in a culturally valued social network. For low-income parents who predominantly enrolled their children in parochial or charter schools, these were social networks composed of parents of color who engaged in the labor of researching schools, applying to schools, and persisting until a child was selected. These efforts to opt-out of their disadvantaged neighborhood public schools and secure them a seat in a culturally valued public school made them better parents imbued with the objectified cultural capital of membership in a distinctive school community. For middle-class parents this meant membership in distinctive public or private progressive school communities located in relatively more affluent and Whiter neighborhoods where parents had more capital.

Parents conceptualization of the relationship between school choice and parenting revealed significant intra-racial, –neighborhood, and –school community ruptures and assumptions of
cultural deficit that are important for parent organizers to attend to. For instance, two immigrant mothers from very different class positions who made different school choices as a result strongly asserted that the problem plaguing neighborhood public schools was that other parents were unmotivated to do school choice “research” or “homework.” Importantly, they assumed that their neighbors with children enrolled in the neighborhood public school had not already researched other options and that choice was the only way for parents to be invested and involved. Inversely, other parents with children enrolled in different “no excuses” charters were strongly critical of other parents’ efforts to identify issues and demand changes within their charter community, framing them as ungrateful complainers who should use their power to leave the school if unhappy. This is in striking contrast to the dynamic other middle-class parents appreciated about schools located in relatively more affluent and Whiter public and private schools wherein parents’ capital made the schools accountable to them.

These are all indications that enhanced public school choice through charter school policy has had negative consequences for relationships between and among Black parents and neighbors that needs to be addressed through organizing efforts. All of the parents who engaged in critiques of their neighbors or other parents also contradicted themselves by also acknowledging that parents in their neighborhoods have few reasonable choices, referring to their own ability to afford tuition or access a seat in a public school of choice as a stroke of luck or fortune, and expressing concern about racial educational equality for their neighbors’ children. Further, parents with a range of perspectives and experiences shared a motivation of participating in this study because they wanted researchers and policymakers to learn
from their school choice stories in order to improve systems for other parents. In other words, while fissures are evident, so is a collective spirit. This suggests an opportunity for parents to become more united in neighborhoods through parent-centered (rather than school choice advocacy- or opposition-focused) organizing focused on racial educational equity.

*Schooling as the Pursuit of Dominant Cultural Capital*

Parents internalized the dominant narrative of the purpose of schooling as preparation for college and careers in an increasingly competitive global society and they perceived school choice as a means to dominant embodied cultural capital acquisition. This finding is inconsistent with some other school choice research claiming that Black students' disproportionate concentration in charters is a result of Black parents' preference for ethnocentric schools that protect their children's racial identities through acquisition of non-dominant or Black cultural capital. In other words, it rejects the conceptualization of Black “self-segregation” through preference and choice of culturally pluralistic school models. In contrast, across the sample parents expressed a strong preference for acquisition of dominant cultural capital through schools with “diverse” students bodies, a term that seemed to serve as proxy for Whiteness in most accounts.

While sharing belief that the purpose of schooling is preparation for college and career in an increasingly competitive globalized society and that their neighborhood schools were incapable of meeting that end, parents diverged socioeconomically when it came to the type of educational model they preferred and chose for their own children. Low-income parents in this sample embraced the “no excuses” model commonly employed in charters located in
Black neighborhoods, yet had their own concerns and/or were aware of the debates about this model, specifically its discipline policies and parent contracts. They conceptualized quality schooling as an academically rigorous, highly disciplined environment with sufficient funding for extracurricular programming like art and music and referred to tests scores as their reasons for choosing and school and as a measure of progress. An example of subaltern agency, parents who kept their children enrolled in charters tactfully perceived controversial rigid discipline, top-down parent-school relationships, and racially segregated schools as necessary tradeoffs for enhanced academic achievement in schools serving low-income students. In other words, they believed that this was as far up the public school choice hierarchy that their limited capital would take them and their children.

Middle-class parents agreed that the “no excuses” model may benefit low-income children, but were insulted by the model’s underlying assumption of cultural deficit across all Black families regardless of class. Relatedly, they were frustrated that charter proliferation had enhanced opportunities for choice, yet it did not create a range of educational models to choose from because the “no excuses” model was the monopoly of charters in their neighborhoods. They preferred a progressive educational model for their children and were frustrated that charters and the school district failed to recognize the socioeconomic diversity in their neighborhoods by providing a more diversified school choice marketplace. Notably, parents strongly associated progressive schools with diversity, perhaps because they used their capital to access progressive private and public schools that are disproportionately concentrated in more affluent and Whiter neighborhoods.
Parents rejected the concept of a universal educational model for all children and concurred with Delpit’s (1995) that progressive education is not the best fit for all children. However, they were critical of an administration and charter school sector that did not anticipate or recognize a diversity of capital in Black neighborhoods and demanded a more diversified set of educational model choices in their neighborhoods.

_Shifting Preferences and School Mobility_

Finally, precisely because school choice for parents of color is a tactical action made in a racialized and inequitable marketplace that more powerful people control, a comprehensive analysis of parents’ elementary school choice stories for each child revealed evidence that some parents’ preferences shifted over time and that many parents experienced school choice as an ongoing and iterative process that involves researching, applying, choosing/being chosen, working to make a school of choice sustainable, choosing to exit, and recommencing the process. NYC’s school choice marketplace and neighborhood demographics are in constant flux and this impacts parents’ preferences and choices.

The rapid proliferation of charters in Black neighborhoods and concomitant dominant narratives about parental empowerment, racial educational equity, the purpose of schooling, and academic achievement has directly shaped parents’ preferences, yet to varying effects. Speaking to the broader context, one mother spoke of her preferences shifting from a “no excuses” charter designed to enhance the academic achievement of Black boys to a preference for a progressive educational model after the election of President Barack Obama. Like her, others had internalized dominant narratives and were excited about charters, only to have negative charter experiences that caused their preferences to shift. One mother
developed a preference for charters after facing racialized constraints with G&T programs and her neighborhood public school while another developed a preference for parochial schools after the experience of not being selected by any charter lotteries. Parents’ preferences and choices shifted with changes to school admissions policies and locations, both of which changed school demographics. The point of this is that parents’ preferences are as unfixed and mutable as the school choice marketplaces they are engaging in.

Parents’ beliefs about charters are inextricably related to their perceptions of and experiences with other forms of public school choice such as the related decline of the parochial sector and the racialized barriers parents encountered with other forms of public school choice. Another consequence of charter school policy was the experience and negative effects of school mobility for more than half of the parents who participated in the study. Many parents experienced choice as an iterative and ongoing process. In their case enhanced opportunities for choice through charter policy allowed them to choose and escape multiple public and private schools that proved to be unsustainable. This was not a liberating, empowering, or equitable experience; on the contrary, they found their experience of elementary school mobility to be a confounding, depleting, and guilt- and anxiety-ridden experience. Their experiences with racialized constraints across the school choice marketplace is an urgent reminder that any reforms to charter school policy must be complimented with reforms to all elements of the public school choice marketplace. More importantly, this is ultimately a reminder that they and their children would not have had to incur the racialized costs of public school choice had any believed that their neighborhood public school was a reasonable option.
**Policy Implications**

Policymakers must simultaneously recognize parents’ urgent need to escape their neighborhood schools through choice by making inter-neighborhood options more available and publicly commit to investing resources and attention to making neighborhood public schools and the school district more accountable and parent-responsive institutions.

1. *Use school choice policies to promote voluntary socioeconomic integration.* This study’s findings are consistent with other research demonstrating that families avoid enrolling their children in schools with concentrated poverty, regardless of race. For this reason, it is vital to implement policies designed to disperse concentrated poverty through socioeconomic integration.

**Controlled Choice:** There are already efforts underway in NYC to address the problem of concentrated poverty in neighborhood-zoned public schools through assigning students who receive free or reduced price lunch evenly across all public schools in Community School Districts (CSD). As of the time of this writing, CSDs 1 and 3 in Manhattan have proposed controlled choice plans – a method of equitable school assignment first implemented in Cambridge, MA in 1981 to ensure that individual school demographics match city demographics that has been used in nearly 30 school districts - to integrate the schools in its district. Controlled choice involves assigning students to schools at the district level instead of neighborhood level and uses socioeconomic status as a proxy for race in admissions criteria because the 2007 Supreme Court *Parents Involved v. Seattle* ruling makes use of race in admissions criteria very difficult (WNYC, 2016). With controlled choice plans, all parents rank the
public schools they want their children to attend and the school district assigns kindergarteners to schools with the objective of equally distributing students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. (see next page)

The Manhattan CSDs 1 and 3 are racially and socioeconomically mixed, and this CSD-level socioeconomic integration plan has a stronger potential to impact more socioeconomically diverse central Brooklyn CSDs like 13, 17, and 18 than CSDs with high percentages of concentrated poverty like 23. Thus, controlled choice is only a partial solution.

**Figure 5. Mapping poverty in central Brooklyn**

![Map of Brooklyn poverty](image)

Magnets and Unzoned Schools: Multiple school choice policies designed to promote socioeconomic integration must be implemented, instead of just one. Black parents would benefit from the opportunity to choose from more magnet and public unzoned schools in their neighborhoods. Enhanced school choice seems to be the rallying cry of politicians regardless of party, and efforts must be made to ensure that policymakers consider and support the all forms of school choice, not just charters.

Some of this work is already underway in NYC. Using funding from a small federal grant program to enhance diversity in December of 2014, NYSED (2014) announced a 3-year Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program (SIPP) that granted up to 25 Title I Focus or Priority Schools with up to $1.25 million in funding to implement magnet programs that increase academic achievement of low socioeconomic groups while also attracting higher socioeconomic groups such as dual-language, career pathways, STEM, or Montessori educational programs. A maximum of 8 NYC’s 1564 public schools were eligible to receive this grant and the only elementary school recipient was a central Brooklyn CSD 13 school that is developing a pilot admissions policy. This is a necessary new addition to and Brooklyn’s existing bank of three zoned elementary schools with magnet in their title and four elementary schools that were awarded magnet grants of $1.5 million in 2010, all of which are located outside of predominately Black neighborhoods and CSDs.

While there is a need for more magnet schools in predominately Black neighborhoods and CSDs, there is a dual need for parents to be informed of their unzoned public school options. While parents identified zoning as an issue and were aware of charters as an
option, not a single parent explicitly identified unzoned public schools that were not charters as an option they considered and some confused unzoned schools they had enrolled their children in for charters. As of this writing, there are 26 unzoned elementary public schools that are not charters in Brooklyn (5 others located in central Brooklyn neighborhoods were closed the year of this writing). Many low-income parents appeared to believe that charters were their only alternative. It is important that all parents are aware of and understands the range of public school choice options at their disposal and the processes as well as the costs and benefits of each option.

2. *Provide state funding to develop and fund School Choice Family Resource Centers in every Community School District.* Section 5563 of the 2001 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act under NCLB pushed choice and required states to provide Parental Information and Resource Centers in order to “help implement successful and effective parental involvement policies, programs, and activities that lead to improvements in student academic achievement and that strengthen partnerships among parents, teachers, principals, administrators, and other school personnel in meeting the education needs of children” (USDOE, 2014). This federal funding has been discontinued and as of this writing there are only two PIRCs operating in NY state (in Watertown and Buffalo) using funding from other sources (National PIRC Coordination Center, 2015). Even before this funding was cut, this was an underfunded mandate, with only eight PIRCs located in NYS in 2009 and only two of those located in the Bronx and Queens boroughs of NYC.
As with magnets, this work is underway in NYC. NYS’s SIPP Request For Proposals listed the development and maintenance of a Family Resource Center to “facilitate the socioeconomic transfer/ voluntary assignment process” during planning and implementation periods as an “allowable activity.” While the majority of the recent NYC SIPP applications were for magnet programs, proposals from CSDs 13 and 1 also proposed centers where parents could go for information about school admissions and engage in public meetings (Wall, 2015; Cohen, 2015). While it is promising that a recent NYS school choice policy made funding allowances for parental information and support, this is obviously not sufficient support with parents grappling with school choice borough or citywide.

All federal and state choice policies should include a mandated allotment for funding centers dedicated to informing and supporting parents school choices in each NYC CSD. This is especially true for the NYS Charter School Act of 1998 charter school policy, which has created a fluctuating and complex school choice marketplace and must contribute to the CSD support of parents as informed consumers. These centers should be non-partisan and neither advocates nor opponents of choice. They should be staffed by parent representatives from each CSD and informed by the existing knowledge and strategies of private consultants such as Joyce Szufliita of NYC Help, LLC and school choice research findings about parents’ information preferences and asymmetries.

3. *Diversify public school choice marketplaces in Black neighborhoods.* Despite the costs incurred while engaging in choice, Black parents who participated in this study want more public school choices. They want charter leaders to provide their neighborhoods
with a diversified array of educational models, not just the “no excuses” model. Specifically, they want charters to recognize the diversity of capital in their neighborhoods and to replicate progressive public schools that are concentrated in relatively affluent and predominately White neighborhoods. In addition, they want increased and equitable access to G&T testing and programs. Several parents only chose charters after harrowing experiences with the G&T testing process and the paucity of G&T programs in their districts. In 2016 NYCDOE announced plans to open G&T programs in CSDs that do not currently have them so that every CSD has a program by next year (Harris, 2016). This is a positive step forward, and NYCDOE should continue that trajectory with funding parent-driven information campaigns about the testing and application process, ensuring the equitable location of G&T testing locations in each CSD, and providing targeted support to new and existing G&T programs in low-income and high poverty CSDs. In addition, diversification efforts should also include funding more magnet programs in predominately Black CSDs and neighborhoods.

4. Recognize demands within calls for recent civil rights organization’s calls for charter moratoriums and amend New York State Charter Schools Act of 1998 to make charters more transparent and accountable to families. According to market logic, charters are assumed to be more consumer-responsive than traditional public schools, yet this and many other studies have proven this not to be the case.

Filing Complaints: NYS Charter School Law distinguishes between formal complaints – those that involve a violation of the school charter or of NYS charter law – and informal complaints. The following list outlines NYCDOE’s Office of Charter School’s
recommended process for filing a formal compliant that has been interpreted from Section 2855 (4). Issues with each stage are identified as well.

1) *Gain familiarity with the charter’s guidelines and contact charter leadership.* Parents are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the “school’s policies, guidelines, and reference materials” through reading materials such as “parent handbooks, student discipline policies related to your concern, dress code pamphlets, and school-issued memorandums.” This stage assumes that all parents have the time and ability to access, read, and comprehend such texts when surveys of adult skills have shown that 29-percent of adults read only at a basic level while an additional 14-percent read at a below basic levels (OECD, 2016).

2) *Appeal to the charter’s Board of Trustees.* Only a few parents mentioned taking this step while advocating for their children. One of the issues highlighted in the NAACP’s call for a charter moratorium is that charters have privately appointed boards that do not represent the public and they demand legislation that ensures parents have access to boards. While Section 2851 (2c) requires charters to outline their procedure for conducting and publicizing monthly board meetings and a process to promote parental and staff involvement in school governance, there is no mention of oversight of charter’s implementation of these practices beyond conditions of the proposal nor requirements for parent or community representation on charter governing boards.

3) *Appeal to the charter’s authorizing institution.* Not a single parent who struggled with charters mentioned any awareness of a charter authorizing agency. NYC
schools have three different authorizing agencies and parents must engage in a complex Internet search to figure out which agency authorized their charters and how to contact them.

4) *Appeal to the NYS board of Regents.* The fourth stage is to submit a written appeal to the NYS Board of Regents via email or letter.

The only guidance parents receive for “unofficial” complaints is to check the charter’s policies again and work with the school leadership and the Board to resolve the issue. This assumes that parents have the time and ability to continue to advocate for in the charter and access and comprehend the charter’s terms and that the charter will be responsive; while parents were willing to expend the time and energy at great personal cost, there is little evidence in this study that charters are responsive to parents’ complaints or concerns.

This complaint process assumes that parents have the time and capacity to go though the “official” compliant process to protect their children. Further, this policy assumes students are enrolled in charters and does not account for the commonly documented trend of charters counseling-out parents and provides no recourse for these parents to complain. Section 2854 (2a) makes denial of admission on the basis of “on the basis of intellectual ability, measures of achievement or aptitude, athletic ability, disability, race, creed, gender, national origin, religion, or ancestry” illegal. However, it provides no course of action for parents who feel as though they’ve been denied access.

NYS needs to better regulate charters and support parents through providing a simple and accessible means for parents to file complaints with a local policy expert who will
help them comprehend and analyze the charter’s terms and complaint policy then navigate the charter’s complaint process. This should be done through the Charter School Authorizing intuitions that should appoint NYC-based charter school policy experts to act as counsel for parents. After developing a more parent-responsive and – centered complaint policy, the state should provide a publicly accessible database of both formal and informal complaints about every charter and their status that is maintained by each charter authorizer. These complaints should instigate a formally documented process of investigation by the charter authorizing institution and formally factor into charter reauthorization decisions.

**Publicly Accessible Information:** Section 2857 (2) requires charters to post an easily accessible annual report no later than the first day of August for each preceding school year that includes academic an fiscal performance, description of progress made towards charter goals, a certified financial statement, and efforts to meet or exceed retention targets sets by NYS. The law should be amended to require charters to also post links to the NYS Charter Law, their official charter, their complaint procedure, and information about how to directly contact the charter’s authorizing agency on their website.

**Location:** Section 2851 (2j) requires applicants to provide information about the location of the school “if known.” Charters should not be granted until applicants can demonstrate that they have secured a permanent location and are able to accommodate all grade levels the school proposes to serve. Priority should be granted to NYC
charters that have secured their own space and are not dependent on the divisive process of co-location.

Enrollment and Retention Targets: Section 2851 (3) outlines two of the three state authorizing agencies enrollment and retention targets as the following: students with disabilities, English language leaners, and low-income students eligible for free or reduced price lunch for application and renewals. A charter's proposed targets must be comparable to those of students attending the same NYC CSD where the charter will be located. The emphasis on targeting low-income students and matching CSD numbers is intended to be an equity measure but will reinforce poverty concentration in charters located in CSDs with high poverty levels such as CSD 23. Priority should be granted to charter location and admissions plans designed to promote socioeconomic integration.

Limitations

As with all studies, adaptations to the research design could be made to strengthen these findings. The finding that parents overwhelming perceive choice as the pursuit of dominant cultural capital acquisition and demonstrated little interest in ethnocentric educational models designed to inculcate non-dominant or Black cultural capital is limited by the fact that this research was conducted by an “outsider” White researcher and would be strengthened by replication of this study by “insider” Black researchers. Moreover, NYC ethnocentric charters are limited to Hellenic and Hebrew models and there are no Afrocentric charters; therefore, this finding would be strengthened by analyses of Black parents’ preferences in other urban areas where Afrocentric charters are an option such as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Chicago.
The findings of shifting preferences and trends of school mobility would be stronger had the study been designed to capture parents’ full retrospective accounts of all elementary years once a child was enrolled in middle school instead of using elementary school enrollment of at least one child as selection criteria. This study mixed the perceptions and experiences of parents who had a child who had completed all elementary years with others who had just begun the elementary school choice process with their first children in kindergarten or first grade. In other words, this sample was a mix of parents with years of experience navigating elementary school choice, sometimes for multiple children, with those with only one or two years. It is possible that the parents who were new to elementary school choice have experienced school mobility since being interviewed. Were this study to be replicated, changing the sample criteria to having at least one child who is enrolled in middle school who had attended elementary school in NYC would strengthen findings.

Finally, the scope of this study is limited by the size of its sample of twenty parents. While efforts were made to recruit a purposeful sample that was balanced in terms of socioeconomic and geographic variables, these findings should be interpreted as the beginnings of parent-centered research designed to analyze the racial politics of school choice that is mindful of socioeconomic, ethnic, and geographic diversity across Black parents and the inextricable connections between all forms of public school choice.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Developing a comprehensive Black collective standpoint on the charter school debate requires a comparative case study with other cities or states. For instance, findings from should be compared with other urban areas with large Black and low-income populations
that are also experiencing rapid charter school proliferation such as New Orleans, Detroit, D.C. or Philadelphia. On the state level, New York could be compared with the five other states where Black students constitute over 60-percent of charter school enrollment and where a sizable gap in enrollment numbers between Black charter and traditional public school students exists (Prothero, 2016).

As far as local research is concerned, findings from this study suggest that school mobility is a consequence of enhanced public school choice through charter schools. Based on what we know about the negative impact on students academic achievement (Mehana and Reynolds, 2004) and what this study has demonstrated to be the negative effects on parents, this is a cause for concern and future studies need to determine the scope of this potential issue and its impact on children and parents.

Finally, while studies will be done to evaluate the extent to which New York’s 3-year Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program (SIPP) improved socio-economic integration and improved academic gains, among other indicators of success, researchers interested in advancing racial educational equity should consider documenting the planning and implementation of this program. It is especially important to analyze the planning, implementation and outcomes of the Family Resource Centers in order to provide an evidence-based case for similar centers throughout the city, if warranted. Furthermore, researchers should also consider engaging in an analysis of the politics surrounding the proposed controlled choice plans in CSD 1 and 3 as well as planning and implementation, if given approval.
Conclusion

The national charter school sector is likely to expand in this political climate, in spite of calls for a moratorium from the NAACP and The Movement for Black Lives. The school choice narratives collected nearly fifteen years after charters were implemented in NYC documented by this study should inform adjustments to charter policy and to other inextricably linked school choice policies. This study revealed racialized challenges Black parents experienced when engaging in elementary choice that were related to residential segregation and inequitable school choice markets despite the rapid proliferation of charters in their neighborhoods. As with other school choice policies designed to promote racial educational equity, the liberty granted to Black parents to opt-out of their neighborhood public school was counterbalanced by the inequitable burden of emotional and professional costs when the school choice market functioned as it should and racialized barriers to access and sustainability when it did not.

Regardless of these issues, Black parents want more, not less, choice. The first step to better promoting racial educational equity through choice is to recognize that Black parents not only feel an urgent need to escape their neighborhood public schools, but also a frustrated desire for a robust market of different public schools to choose from. Enhanced choice through charters does not suffice and charter school reform requires connected reforms to the school choice marketplace. Black parents want enhanced access to all forms of school choice inside and outside of their neighborhood, and this includes a desire for a diversity of educational models used by charters in their neighborhoods. Concomitantly, Black parents also want to be able to choose their neighborhood public schools; the crux of the issue is
these schools were not perceived to a reasonable option in the first place. A core element of racial educational equity reform is school district administration public recommitment to value, invest in, and improve public schools located in Black neighborhoods through policies designed to promote parent-responsive institutions and socioeconomic integration.
Study: The Class and Race Politics of School Choice in Brooklyn, NY

Brooklyn Parents of Elementary Students: What do you think about school choice in NYC? What about charter schools in your neighborhood? Make your voices heard!

- Are you a parent or guardian of a child in grades 1 – 5 attending a public, charter, parochial or private school?
- Do you live in Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, Ocean Hill, or Brownsville?
- Do you identify as Black or African American?
- Do you have thoughts about and/or experiences with school choice in NYC that you would like to share?

If you answered YES to these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a study about school choice in Brooklyn, NY. The purpose of this study is to bring the knowledge of Black and African American parents to the center of debates about school choice and charter schools. **Participants will receive a payment of $20** for an interview that will last about 2 hours. Interviews will be conducted when and where you prefer.

Please contact **Shannon Allen**
- PhD candidate at CUNY Graduate Center – for more information.
  **Call:** 347-470-8083
  **Email:** snacuny@gmail.com
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Part I: Choosing schools in NYC

Tell me about your child/ren’s current school/s.
- What do you like about it? What do you dislike?
- How many schools has your child attended?
- How does this current school differ from other schools that your child/ren has attended in the past?

Tell me about your experience finding and choosing the school/s that your child/ren attend/s now.
- Was this school your first choice? What options did you consider? Can you rank them from best to worst?
- How did you learn about this school? Who did you talk to, what did you read, where did you go for help?
- How did you decide on this school? What were the most important factors you considered?
- Did you experience any difficulties choosing and/or accessing schools?
- Do you think that all parents in NYC have the same options to choose from?

Tell me about someone you know (relative or friend) who has made different school choices for his/her children. Why do you think it is that you and this person have made different school choices?

Is there anything else that you would like to say before we move on?

Part II: Interactions with schools as a student and parent

Tell me about your experience as an elementary school student.
- Where did you grow up and go to elementary school?
- What type of schools did you attend? (Private, public?)

How, if at all, have your experiences as a student influenced the school choices you have made for your children?

Would you say that your child/ren’s experiences with schools today are different from your experience with schools when you were a child?
- If yes, how?
- If no, why not?

Would you say that your experience as a parent today is different from your parents’ experiences with schools when you were a child?
- If yes, how? If no, why not?
Can you think of a time when you felt like you or were treated unfairly or differently by a school or the school district because of your race or class?

- What about your child/ren? Your parents?
- How, if at all, does this influence the way you interact with schools today?

How, if at all, have these experiences influenced the school choices you have made for your child/ren?

Is there anything else that you would like to say before we move on?

**Part III: Charter schools**

Tell me about the first time that you heard about charter schools.

- Who, when, where, how, why?
- How did you feel about charter schools when you first heard about them?
- Have your feelings changed over time? Why or why not?

Tell me about a recent (or the most interesting) experience you have had regarding charter schools.

- Who, when, where, how, why?

Why do you think that charter schools are so popular?

Some people support charter schools because they believe that the competition created by charters will force other schools to improve. Given your experiences as both a student and a parent, what is your reaction to this?

Some people are opposed to charter schools because they believe that charter schools take control of public schools from the community and hand it over to private business interests. Given your experiences as both a student and a parent, what is your reaction to this?

Some people support charter schools because they believe that charters provide a good opportunity for teachers, parents and communities to have more control over school leadership and what gets taught in schools. Given your experiences as both a student and a parent, what is your reaction to this?

Some people are opposed to charter schools because they have increased already high rates of racial segregation of students, especially for Black students. Given your life experiences as a student and a parent, what is your reaction to this?

Tell me about someone you know who has different beliefs about and/or experiences with charter schools than you. Why do you think it is that you and this person have different beliefs about and experiences with charter schools?

Is there anything else that you would like to say?


the School Choice Universe: Evidence and Recommendations (pp. 65–88). Information Age Publishing.


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