All Choices Created Equal? The Role of Choice Sets in the Selection of Schools

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Reformers suggest that parental choice will improve equity by making it possible for parents to select better schools for their children. A key assumption behind this claim is that parents choose from a set of schools that range in quality. Data from this longitudinal interview study suggest this assumption may be false. In one Midwestern city, parents of different social class backgrounds did not consider schools of similar quality. The set of schools considered by parents, called the choice set, differed; though parents' choice processes and reasoning were remarkably similar. These data suggest that in addition to the well-documented constraints of income, information, and transportation, the resources used to construct choice sets may further constrain the schools parents consider. These findings raise questions about the ability of current choice policies to deliver the equity outcomes reformers suggest.

Across the country, poor children and children of color are "trapped" in inferior schools (Kozol, 2005). Many are assigned to neighborhood schools that are poorly funded (Bifulco, 2005) and have the most inexperienced teachers (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). They often do not have transportation which would allow them to leave those neighborhood schools (e.g., Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996; Nelson, Muir, & Drown, 2000). And they cannot afford housing in neighborhoods with better schools (e.g., Logan, 2002). These facts, widely agreed upon by scholars across the political spectrum, contrast sharply with the belief that all children, regardless of where they grow up or how much money their parents earn, should have access to public schools that support high academic achievement.

One potential solution to this problem is parental choice. Increased parental choice will allow these families to escape and select better schools for their children (e.g., Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Moe, 1995). This movement toward better schools will enhance equity by giving poor children and children of color access to a quality education. Finally, children will no longer be trapped.

A key assumption behind this claim is the idea that parents choose among schools of varying quality. School choice theory rests on the idea that the set of schools from which parents select— their choice sets—must have at least some good schools. If parents' choice sets contain only bad schools, school choice will allow them to escape, but their children will still be trapped in

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inferior schools (Dillon, 2008). Thus, simply giving parents the opportunity to choose among many schools of similar low quality will not produce the equity gains choice promises.

Rather than presume we know the set and the quality of schools from which parents choose, this study treats the choice set as an object of investigation. To better understand parents' choice sets, I ask three related questions. First, what schools are in parents' choice sets? Second, what processes do parents use to construct those choice sets? Finally, what factors shape choice set construction?

I begin with a discussion of my use of rational choice theory, which draws on insights from the disciplines of sociology and psychology. I then describe the families who participated in the study and the methods used to conduct the investigation. Third, I describe parents' choice sets and the processes they used to construct choice sets. Finally, I analyze three widely used resources for choice set construction and consider the implications for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although there is a great deal of research on the factors parents take account of in making their choices (Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001), the processes parents use to choose schools have largely been uninvestigated by choice researchers (Hamilton & Guin, 2005). The level of specification in Bast and Walberg's (2004) explanation of how parents choose is representative of the literature more generally. They explained, "Parents choose schools for their children based on costs and benefits (incentives), the availability of information, and the presence of opportunities (choices)" (p. 432). Like many other researchers, Bast and Walberg stop there. We know little about the fundamental aspects of the choice process (e.g., which schools are considered and how parents come to consider those schools). To better understand the choice process, I use insights from the literatures on bounded rationality, selection of postsecondary institutions, and social capital. These insights situate parents in their socio-historical realities thereby allowing for a contextualized explanation of their actions.

Parents Have Bounded Rationality

Herbert Simon's Nobel Prize–winning work on decision making, bounded rationality, and satis-ficing is particularly relevant to parental choice. Simon's work suggests that human beings cannot take account of all possibilities when they choose. They use heuristics and shortcuts; they have bounded rationality. Simon's work also suggests that individuals do not necessarily choose the best option. Instead, they are "cognitive misers" and satisfice (Simon, 1986), "using experience to construct an expectation of how good a solution we might reasonably achieve and halting search as soon as a solution is reached that meets the expectation" (Simon, 1990, p. 9). When parents choose schools, we might expect that they will not consider every school in their district nor will they necessarily choose the best school. We would expect, however, parents will select reasonable schools given their expectations of what is reasonable.

Humans' bounded rationality and the serious opportunity costs of actually considering every school to which one could reasonably transport their child require parents to consider some smaller set. The choice set is the set of schools a parent considers. It is defined subjectively by

the parent. Conceptually, the choice set is an analytic tool that describes and quantifies parents' bounded rationality (e.g., Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lurie, 2004). The attributes of the choice set—its size, geography, prestige, and expense—provide insights into the heuristics and shortcuts parents use to simplify the decision-making process.

It is important to note that the choice set is, by definition, subjective. Parents create their choice sets. A choice set may or may not reflect the schools close to a parent's home. It may or may not reflect the variety of schools that actually exist at a given grade level in a particular city. By considering the content of the choice set and the processes used to create it, we are better able to understand how parents' agency and market structures interact in parents' decisions.

The Construction of the Choice Set

When a child reaches fifth grade and it is time to select a middle school, the parent does not suddenly invent a choice set. To varying degrees, the schools that parents are willing to consider evolve over time—something we must account for if we hope to understand parents' actions. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage choice process that students use to choose an institution of higher education. I apply it here to K-12 parental choice to illuminate the development of parents' choice sets.

There are three stages in Hossler and Gallagher's model: predisposition, search, and choice. The predisposition stage is when students decide if they want to continue their schooling beyond high school. If they so choose, students move on to the search stage in which they "gather information about institutions of higher education" (p. 209). During the search stage, some students also develop criteria for judging schools. The third and final stage, the choice stage, is when students actually decide on a college or university to attend. Hossler and Gallagher emphasized the interactions embedded in all stages, explaining that—throughout the stages—both structural and individual factors interact to create outcomes, which, in turn, influence the ultimate school selection.

This three stage model is generative. It provides a straightforward set of categories to understand the process of constructing the choice set, and it emphasizes the structural and individual factors shaping parents' actions. I use these three categories to study parents' search behavior (predisposition and search), the resources they draw on during the search (search), and the reasons they give for their final decisions (choice).

Resources for Constructing Choice Sets

As parents set about constructing their choice sets and determining which school might be best for their child, they do so in a segregated, stratified social context. Parents do not have equal access to transportation, information, time for school visits, money for tuition, or English language skills. Resources, both material and immaterial, are not distributed evenly among parents of differing social class backgrounds.

Studies of parental involvement find that social capital is a particularly important resource upon which parents draw to help their children succeed in school (Chin & Phillips, 2004; Holme, 2002; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 1989, 2003). Social capital is "the material

and immaterial resources that individuals and families are able to access through their social ties" (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 323).[1] Social capital is important for many parent–school interactions, ranging from how parents negotiate school problems to the information parents seek out in school choice decisions.

Parents' social networks shape the strategies and resources available to address problems at school. For example, Horvat and her colleagues (2003) found that when faced with problems such as inappropriate teacher behavior or disagreeable academic placements, middle-class parents' networks provided the information, authority, and expertise necessary to resolve disagreements in the parents' favor. In contrast, working-class networks did not provide parents such resources and their negotiations with schools were less successful than middle-class parents.

The information that flows across social networks is another type of social capital that has been linked to parents' school selections (Holme, 2002; Schneider, Teske, Roch, & Marschall, 1997). Holme's interview study of mostly White, middle-class and upper middle-class parents found that parents' schooling decisions relied almost solely on information from high status members of their social networks. Usually that information—which was often either partially or wholly inaccurate—concerned the reputations of schools instead of the curricular, test score, and other academic data about the school. Despite this, the information was highly valued. These studies, and others like them (e.g., Schneider et al., 1997), highlight both the importance of social networks and how uneven and inaccurate network information can be.

Previous descriptions of K-12 choice have implicitly conceptualized parents as equals, all able to draw on similar resources to choose from the schools geographically available to them. The literatures on decision making, college choice, and parental involvement draw attention to the historical and social factors that may shape parents' choice processes. Taken together, these literatures suggest the content and construction of choice sets will be shaped by the processes parents employ and their understanding and use of resources.

METHODS

To understand the composition and construction of parents' choice sets, I conducted a longitudinal comparative case study of 48 parents' thinking prior to their children attending sixth or ninth grade. I followed parents from January to November of 2003, interviewing them multiple times over the 9 months before, during and after they selected a new school. This allowed me to study the dynamic, situated nature of choice set development. It also allowed me to investigate the interactions between parents and the local choice market.[2] To my knowledge, this is the only U.S. study to follow parents longitudinally in this way.

The study's design purposely used diverse prior choices as a proxy for diverse parental thinking. Thus, it includes parents whose children had a wide range of schooling experiences. Within the sample, parents previously sent their children to both "failing" and "nonfailing" schools across six types of schools (neighborhood public, magnet public, charter, secular private, nonsecular private, and homeschool). By deliberately selecting a diverse group of parents, the 9-month study gave me access to a wide range of ways parents' thought about the schools. The study's design

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[1]Social capital has been operationalized many ways; see Dika and Singh (2002) for a review.

[2]I use the term "market" for simplicity; however, a more accurate term may be quasi-market (Henig, 1994).

does not allow for generalizations regarding particular groups. My goal is to describe the range of ways parents constructed choice sets and chose schools over time.

The Context

Like many cities and their surrounding suburbs in the Midwest, Weldon[3] is racially and economically isolated from its suburbs. Despite recent progress, the divide remains large. The city population is more than 88% people of color and has a median family income of approximately $33,000. In contrast, the adjacent suburbs have, on average, populations that are 18% people of color with a median family income of $62,000. Generally, the schools mirror this racial and economic segregation. Weldon schools are largely made up of students of color and students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, whereas many suburban schools are overwhelmingly White, with small proportions of students who qualify for the federal lunch program.

There is a long history of choice in Weldon. However, until recently, choice was available only through residential movement or enrollment at tuition-based private schools. This changed dramatically a decade ago when the state passed its charter law. Since then, Weldon has been the site of much charter activity. As of 2001, parents living in Weldon and the adjacent ring of suburbs enjoyed choice options which include some 98 charter, 393 private, 48 magnet, and 341 traditional public schools. Prior to the increase in charter schools and magnet schools, Weldon was a district with strong neighborhood school boundaries. Currently, the district is an option-demand system (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000); parents are assigned a neighborhood school based on their address, but they may request a transfer to another school if space is available at the receiving school. Although anecdotal evidence suggests this form of choice may be underutilized, there has been a recent outpouring of students to charters and neighboring districts—more than 20,000 left between 1999 and 2005.

Sampling

The goal of the sampling procedure was to gather a group of parents that might think about choice in different ways. Because I could not know how parents would think about a future choice a priori, I constructed a sample of parents who had previously chosen schools with diverse characteristics. To gather schools that ranged in quality, all elementary and middle schools 5 miles on either side of the border between Weldon and the adjacent suburbs were classified as failing or nonfailing. A school was considered failing if, according to state accountability policy, it did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2000–01 or (in the case of secular and nonsecular schools) was unaccredited by any accrediting agency. Conversely, nonfailing schools made AYP or were accredited.[4]

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[3] All names are pseudonyms selected by parents and students in the study.

[4] Schools were accredited by a variety of accrediting bodies (e.g., Independent Schools Association of the Central States, North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement). The vast majority of accreditation bodies require standards-based self-study and an accreditation visit by peers.

The distinction between failing and nonfailing is based on state accountability policies, but it is murky. There are a number of reasons it is complicated to judge school quality with these categories. First, we do not have a single metric against which all schools are judged. This means we must use different criteria for public and private schools. Second, if one assumes that standardized tests can measure school quality, private and religious schools need not participate in such tests nor must they make scores public, even if they do participate. Thus we do not have access to test scores for all schools. A final problem with the failing/nonfailing distinction is its validity. Because the criteria upon which states judge schools are themselves political objects, they may or may not be valid measures of school quality. Across the country there is a great deal of discussion about how states determine when a school is failing and whether that designation actually relates to problems significant enough to deserve sanctions (e.g., Winerip, 2005). Despite all this, No Child Left Behind imposes severe consequences on failing public schools, such as allowing students to transfer to other schools. Further, policymakers presume this label has meaning to parents regardless of its validity. So although this distinction is analytically weak, it affects the schools available to parents.

I use this distinction as a crude way of tracking the schools parents consider. It is not clear how failing and nonfailing schools differ; however, I apply the definition to all schools.[5] Thus, as a marker, the distinction allows me to track schools across parents' choice processes. I track other markers as well (i.e., selectivity, tuition requirements).

After classifying schools in the border region of Weldon, a purposeful sample of one failing and one nonfailing school was selected for each of five school types (neighborhood pubic, magnet public, charter public, secular private, and nonsecular private). School principals were asked to supply a list of fifth (or eighth) graders' addresses. By using 2000 census data, each address was assigned a median family income based on its block group. Addresses were then stratified into low, middle, and high income categories.[6] Potential participants were randomly selected from each of the three income groups and contacted by telephone. This resulted in a sample of 48 parents stratified by their current status at a failing or nonfailing school and median family income. Parents with similar characteristics replaced those parents who declined participation. The positive response rate was 60%, the nonresponse rate 32%, and the negative response rate 8%. The sample of 45 mothers and 3 fathers was comprised of 67% African Americans, 27% Whites, 4% Hispanics, and 2% people of other races. The racial profile of the sample was similar to the racial profile of the city; however, it overrepresents white parents (by approximately 13%).

The purpose of this sampling strategy was to gain access to the range of ways Weldon parents might construct choice sets. As such, the study offers new conceptualizations and descriptions of the choice process but it cannot support claims about which schools certain groups (i.e., parents in neighborhood schools, middle-class parents, etc.) will consider or choose.

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[5]Exploratory analyses suggest that the patterns I find are robust even when I recategorize schools based on how many years they did not achieve AYP or how long they were unaccredited.

[6]Less then $39,000 was considered lower income, $39,000 to $88,000 was considered to be middle income, and more than $88,000 was considered to be upper income. These cut points were determined by dividing the income distribution in Weldon and the inner ring of suburbs into thirds so that one third of people fell into each category.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection and analysis were iterative (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used three interviews, which spanned the 9 months preceding and immediately following the selection of a new school, to capture and track parents' choice processes and choice sets. After each wave of data was collected, I transcribed all the interviews and made data representations that were member-checked with parents.

The first interview occurred in February (face-to-face), the second in June (face-to-face), and the third in October (phone). The interviews averaged 60, 49, and 34 min, respectively. All told, 112 hr of interviews were conducted with the 48 parents. All interviews were audio-recorded. Parents were compensated for their participation with a $30 gift certificate to a store of their choice.

At the end of data collection, transcripts were read into the qualitative software, N6, and coded (see Bell, 2004, for coding details). Coded data were then tabulated, entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, checked for accuracy, and imported into the statistical software package SAS. Once in SAS, descriptive statistics were generated around issues of parental reasoning (e.g., the number of schools considered and applied to, the type of choice process, etc.). As discrepancies emerged and additional categories were needed, the process was repeated. This process of analyzing data allowed hypotheses to be tested, accepted or rejected, and revised as necessary. Simultaneously, I wrote analytic memos about patterns and themes that arose while reading and coding the data. These memos were used as the catalyst for discussions with colleagues; those conversations, and the SAS and N6 data analyses, sent me back to the data for additional rounds of analysis.

I operationalized "choice sets" by noting each school a parent mentioned. The schools held different status in parents' minds and across the study's 9 months. Some schools were mentioned and rejected quickly. Others remained viable over the course of the study. Still others were mentioned as nonoptions. I recorded each school considered and the parent's thoughts about that school in a central database. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed me to document the differential status particular schools held within parents' choice sets, as well as the evolution of choice sets over time.

As analyses revealed the importance of social capital in the construction of choice sets, parents were assigned a social class status—poor, working class, or middle class—based on self-reports of income, educational attainment, and autonomy in the workplace. The details of this categorization are described in Bell (2008b). Because this was a relatively small study, these three broad groups captured the range of social class experiences among the parents. This is consistent with other studies of this size and scope (e.g., Lareau, 1989, 2003). I define social class functionally—as a group that possesses a similar income level, autonomy in the workplace, and educational level. I do this in an attempt to take account of the probabilistic nature of the construct (Smith, 2007). By using all three factors in my designation, I took advantage of the incremental validity associated with more complex and robust measures of social class (e.g., Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997).

CONSTRUCTING THE CHOICE SET

Parents of different social class backgrounds used similarly diverse strategies for constructing their choice sets. Parents used one of three search processes: They elected not to search for a

school, they conducted a closed search, or they looked extensively using an open search strategy. I describe each next. Once parents had constructed a choice set, their reasons for selecting a school were similar to those documented in the literature, with the overwhelming proportion of parents citing academic and holistic reasons. Though there were small differences, parents across social classes reported similar reasons for choosing schools.

The Predetermination Phase: Parents Who Do Not Search

As mentioned previously, Weldon parents are in an option-demand choice environment. Of the 48 parents in the study, 40 previously opted out of their neighborhood schools. But substantially fewer opted out of customary enrollment patterns, that is, the patterns made when children attend an expected sequence of schools (elementary, middle, and high). These patterns are comprised of what Fiske and Ladd (2000) called feeder schools. The customary enrollment pattern, often unofficial and unwritten, provides a ready-made next school(s) for most parents. These patterns exist in both the private and public sector. In Weldon, for example, if you go to St. Mary's for middle school, it is expected that you will either go to St. Patrick's or Atonement High School. The moves from St. Mary's to either St. Patrick's or Atonement define two customary enrollment patterns for St. Mary's families. Thus, given parents' previous choices, in the predetermination phase they have to answer a question: Do I need to conduct a search? The answer depends on the parent's preferences regarding both the assigned school and the customary school(s).

Among the 48 Weldon parents, 33 conducted a search and 15 did not. The 15 parents who did not conduct a search were not lazy or disinterested, for they talked extensively and exhaustively about their decision making. They chose not to conduct searches for a range of reasons. The majority of parents (9 of 15) reported that no other schools offered what they wanted. These parents knew the local schooling market from prior searches conducted for older siblings, felt confident that the school in the customary enrollment pattern was what they wanted, and were sure that other schools would not be able to offer what the customary school did. A few parents said that the customary school was a good school with a good reputation, so they were willing to try it. The remaining parents reported that they were comfortable with the customary school and would reassess their decision after the next school year. Although one third of parents did not consider more than one school, effectively ending the construction of the choice set at the predetermination stage, approximately two thirds of parents did search for a school. Their actions help us understand how larger choice sets get constructed.

The Search Phase: Open and Closed Searches

There were two search procedures by which parents came to select a school for their child. The first, the open search, began with a larger set of schools and over time—in interaction with the schooling market—narrowed to some smaller set of schools from which the parent ultimately selected. The second search procedure, a closed search, was a process in which the parent had two, sometimes three, schools in mind. The parent did not seek out other schools to consider and, instead, spent time gathering information about those two to three schools and making the necessary preparations for the child to attend the schools. Preparations included actions such as

taking entrance exams, organizing finances, and arranging transportation. The major differences between an open and a closed search were the number of schools considered and the desire to find additional alternatives to consider. Of the 33 Weldon parents who conducted a search, 11 performed a closed search and 22 performed an open one. On average, closed searches contained 3.4 schools, open searches contained 7.5 schools.

The Choice Phase: Reasons for Choosing

Parents gave 102 different reasons for choosing the school their child ultimately attended. These reasons were coded into six categories: holistic, academic, social, logistic, administrative, and "other." Holistic reasons focused on the child's overall well-being, including reasons such as "They are thriving where they are" and the child "isn't ready for that kind of school." Academic reasons were those that focused on concerns around classroom teaching and learning. The curriculum being "too basic," "good teachers," and "many learning resources" were all coded as academic reasons. Parents mentioned many social reasons as well, for example, "Friends are going there" or the child "knows people there" or the students are "too rough" at that school. Social reasons focused on relational concerns. Logistical reasons were those that pertained to the location, transportation, and cost issues. For example, reasons such as "moving to the area," "too expensive," and "close enough to [the sibling's] school" were all coded as logistical reasons. In contrast, reasons such as "couldn't meet some of the school's paperwork requirements" or "missed the application deadline" were coded as administrative reasons, as they related to how the school was organized and run. Finally, there were a few reasons that did not fit well into any of the other categories. Reasons such as "that school has good lunch" were coded into the other category.[7]

In parents' final school selection, a majority of Weldon parents sited holistic (69%) and academic (58%) reasons for choosing a school. This is consistent with other research that describes parents as concerned with their children's overall development, especially as that development relates to the academic characteristics of schools (e.g., Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Gill et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 2000). Considerably fewer parents cited social (33%), logistic (27%), administrative (25%), and other (1%) reasons.

Given the importance of race in the United States and school choice research, it is worth noting how it played out in parents' choice sets and final reasoning. With a handful of exceptions, city parents were people of color and their choice sets contained only schools in which almost all students were students of color. Suburban parents were White and their choice sets contained schools in which almost all students were White. Many parents said they wanted more diverse schools, but the lack of variation in the racial composition of choice set schools and the cities in which parents reside suggest race issues played out in more subtle ways. Preliminary analyses suggested that a city parent might, for example, choose amongst choice set schools that were 97, 98, and 99% African American. Thus, the differences in choice set schools were so small there

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[7]Parents discussed safety in different ways. On surveys "safety" is a comprehensive category that obscures the subtlety of the ways in which parents use the term. For example, some parents talked about unsafe schools as places that threaten their child's ability to develop, socially and intellectually. Other parents discussed unsafe schools as socially chaotic places in which their child might get "mixed-up" in the wrong crowd. Depending on the context in which the parent discussed their concerns, "safety" was coded in the social, holistic or administrative category.

TABLE 1
Proportion of Parents in Predetermination, Search, and Choice Phases

Phase of Search Process	All	Poor and Working Class	Middle Class
Predetermination			
No search	.31	.24	.39
Search			
Closed	.23	.24	.22
Open	.46	.52	.39
Choice			
Holistic	.69	.64	.74
Academic	.58	.68	.48
Social	.33	.36	.30
Logistic	.27	.32	.22
Administrative	.25	.32	.17
n	48	25	23

Note. Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between features of the search phase and social class group.
*$p < .05$.

was little to study once parents constructed a choice set. That said, race played an important role in the preferences that operated prior to choice set construction (see Bell, 2007, 2008b).

Similar Choice Processes and Reasoning

Although there was remarkable agreement on the criteria used to choose a school, parents constructed their choice sets in variable ways. These differences in choice set construction were not associated with social class background. Parents constructed choice sets in similar ways and reported similar reasons for selecting schools for their children. Between one fourth and one third of parents did not conduct a search and, thus, did not move past the predetermination stage. The majority of parents from both social-class groups conducted some type of search (61% for middle class and 76% for poor and working class).[8] Those searches culminated in a choice that was most frequently attributed to holistic or academic concerns (see Table 1).

Despite these similarities, there were differences between groups of parents. For instance, a greater proportion of poor and working-class parents conducted open searches than middle-class parents. Poor and working-class parents considered a larger number of schools than more advantaged parents. Poor and working-class parents also cited academic reasons for choosing their final school more frequently than did middle-class parents. These differences were not, however, statistically significant.

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[8]This pattern is consistent with one report of non-White parents who receive free lunch subsidies (i.e., poor parents) articulating preferences for more schools than non-White wealthier parents (Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2008).

TABLE 2
Characteristics of Mean Parent's Choice Set and Final School Selection, by Social Class

Characteristic	Choice Set				Final School Selection	
	Poor and Working Class	n	Middle Class	n	Poor and Working Class	Middle Class
Nonfailing[a]	.38 (.37)	25	.65* (.38)	19	.36[b]	.53*
Selective[a]	.37 (.32)	25	.71** (.17)	23	.24[b]	.74**
Tuition based[a]	.14 (.29)	25	.50** (.40)	23	.24[b]	.43
At least 2 nonfailing schools[b]	.16	25	.58**	19		
No. of schools[a]	4.3 (3.0)	25	3.4 (2.3)	23		

[a]Two-tailed independent t tests assessed the difference between mean proportions. [b]Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between the choice set characteristic and social-class group. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

PARENTS' CHOICE SETS

Similar means led to different ends for the 48 Weldon parents. Despite the fact parents across social classes used similar processes and reasoning, there were important differences in the types of schools parents considered (Table 2).

Middle-class parents' choice sets contained, on average, a greater percentage of nonfailing, selective,[9] and tuition-based schools than did poor and working-class parents' choice sets. In addition, just 16% of poor and working-class parents had at least two nonfailing schools in their choice sets, whereas 58% of middle-class parents had at least two. The differences between parents' choice sets were consistent with differences between the schools parents ultimately selected.

In August, 53% of middle-class parents chose a nonfailing school as compared with 36% of poor and working-class parents. Middle-class parents chose selective and tuition-based schools at higher rates than poor and working-class parents. Although a greater proportion of middle-class parents chose nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools than poor and working-class parents, I do not know if they chose schools of better academic quality. Comparative data (e.g., standardized test scores, teacher qualifications, etc.) were publicly unavailable for almost half of the schools parents selected. Thus, it is possible that middle-class parents chose better schools, but these data only support the claim they chose different schools.

To summarize, both groups of parents used similarly diverse strategies to choose. Poor and working-class parents sought out schools and reasoned in ways similar to more advantaged parents. They considered more schools and cited academic reasons more often than middle-class parents. Yet poor and working-class parents' choice sets and final school selections included a higher proportion of failing, nonselective, free schools than those of middle-class parents. In short, similar strategies resulted in different outcomes. Social class differences in parents' choice

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[9]Selective schools are schools that have competitive entrance requirements, require an entrance exam or a financial commitment beyond paying taxes. Magnet, secular, nonsecular, and homeschools are in this category.

sets may not be particularly surprising, however, they have not yet been documented in the literature.

Previous work has documented how less than optimal parental decision making and market shortcomings (e.g., inadequate school supply, transportation) can account for parents' decisions to select seemingly undesirable schools, such as some of the ones selected in Weldon (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999; Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997; Schneider et al., 2000). Although these constraints certainly played a role, the nature of the resources parents used to construct their choice sets acted as an additional constraint on parents' considerations.

CLASS-BASED DIFFERENCES IN RESOURCES FOR CONSTRUCTING CHOICE SETS

When constructing their choice sets, poor and working-class parents used the same resources as middle-class parents but encountered a smaller proportion of nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools. Three social and historical resources were crucial for choice set construction across social classes. Social networks, customary enrollment patterns, and students' academic histories shaped all parents' choice sets, but did so differently.

Social Networks

Previous analyses suggest that social networks can provide parents with many resources for choosing schools (e.g., Schneider et al., 1997). This was true for Weldon parents. They used their networks to gather information about particular schools, learn about new schools, and gather multiple perspectives on a single school. With few exceptions, parents placed a great deal of importance on the value of information gathered through these networks.

Of the 48 parents, all but 3 used their social networks to learn about schools. This high level of use was similar across social classes. Networks tended to be comprised of family, friends from church, neighbors, and parents of their children's friends.[10] Network members nominated more than three fourths of all the schools in choice sets. These networks did not, however, provide access to similar schools.

Overall, middle-class parents' social networks put them in contact with a higher proportion of nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools than did poor and working-class parents' networks (see Table 3). Middle-class parents like Mrs. Brown discovered potential schools through her son's friends' parents. Parents at Sebastian's yearlong Saturday technology classes were particularly trusted and knowledgeable. She explained, "[The other parents] know every school in the city. When Sebastian was in session, we all would talk. That's where I get a lot of my information." Mrs. Brown's choice set contained four schools, three nonfailing, three selective, and one tuition based. Working-class and poor parents also talked about schooling and schools with people in their networks; however, the characteristics of those schools differed substantively. One of the poor mothers, Mrs. Gooden, asked friends, family members, and parents of her daughter's friends what schools they were considering and any information they had about those schools. This

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[10]No data were collected on social network members' race, income, ethnicity, or child's academic performance.

TABLE 3

Characteristics of Mean Parent's Social Network, Customary Enrollment Pattern, and Child's Academic History, by Social Class

Contextual Factors	Poor and Working Class	n	Middle Class	n
Social networks				
Schools nonfailing[a]	.48 (.32)	23	.64 (.43)	18
Schools selective[a]	.31 (.36)	23	.90** (.19)	22
Schools tuition based[a]	.14 (.31)	23	.64** (.42)	22
Customary enrollment pattern				
Schools nonfailing[a]	.44 (.47)	24	.57 (.49)	15
Schools selective[a]	.23 (.36)	24	.73** (.37)	15
Schools tuition based[a]	.10 (.29)	24	.50** (.46)	15
Child's academic history				
A or "mostly" A student[b]	.40	25	.83**	23
B student[b]	.48	25	.17**	23
Successful academic year[b]	.56	25	.87*	23
Students retained[a]	.12	25	.00	23

[a]Two-tailed independent t tests assessed the difference between mean proportions. [b]Exact chi-square tests assessed the relationship between the contextual factor and social-class group. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

$*p < .05.$ $**p < .01.$

resulted in a choice set of four schools, zero nonfailing, two selective, and zero tuition-based. The differential access to high quality schools these examples illustrate is noteworthy given the large proportion of schools nominated by social networks.

Customary Enrollment Patterns

As mentioned earlier, customary enrollment patterns exist in all school sectors (except home-schools). In charter, secular, and nonsecular schools, there tended to be more than one school in the customary pattern. In neighborhood schools, there was usually a single school in the pattern. Overall, schools in the customary enrollment pattern accounted for 49% of the schools in parents' choice sets. Though Weldon parents were not bound to select the next school in the customary pattern, many did. The tidal pull was strong.[11]

In many cases preferences around these schools were important in the decision to search at all. One middle-class mother, Mrs. Erhardt, explained her thinking about where to send her eighth-grade daughter. "All of her friends will go to St. Christopher. But I have some concerns. So I'm looking into other options. I'm not sure if we'll find something we like better." The presumed school was St. Christopher. Had Mrs. Erhardt been comfortable with the school, her choice set would have been a single school. She would not have searched at all. Similarly, Mrs. Bordon

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[11]These customary enrollment patterns do not necessarily keep parents close to home. On average, middle-class parents traveled 4.6 miles and poor and working-class parents 4.9 miles to their selected schools. Geography played an important role in choice (Bell, 2007, 2008a), however, because of space constraints, I do not explore that role here.

considered a noncustomary school only when her eighth-grade son said he did not want to attend the school in the customary pattern. After thinking about her own experience being forced to go to a high school she did not want to attend and the risks involved in forcing her son to do the same, Mrs. Bordon allowed her son to opt out of the customary pattern. Had Mrs. Bordon's son been comfortable with the customary school, she would have happily sent him there.

Parents across social classes selected schools in the customary school enrollment pattern at similar rates; 52% of middle-class and 56% of poor and working-class parents. Customary enrollment patterns did not, however, provide contact with similar schools (Table 3). Paralleling the contact provided by social networks, poor and working-class parents' customary enrollment patterns provided little access to nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools.

The evidence from social networks and customary enrollment patterns suggests that parents across social classes drew on these resources at similar rates. Despite this, middle-class parents had greater contact with nonfailing, selective, and tuition-based schools. Contact with a school through social networks or the customary enrollment pattern does not necessarily ensure that a parent will choose one of those schools. Thus, we consider a third factor that shaped parents choice sets: children's academic histories.

Children's Academic Histories

All children's academic histories shaped the types of schools parents perceived to be "real" options. There were, however, class-based differences in those academic histories.

Mrs. Carol's thinking shows how parents connected children's academic histories to the schools they considered. Her thinking is representative. She explained how her eighth-grade son Denzel's prior achievement shaped her thinking about where he should go to high school:

> [If] I'm sending him to public school for free and he's going there and he's not putting forth no effort, then I would really be fighting a losing battle to spend all my money and send him over there [pointing to a private school down the street] . . . 'cause you've got to be motivated to learn, you know, and that starts from within. And I'm working on getting him motivated. And that's hard.

Mrs. Carol made a connection between her child's historical achievement and future school. She concluded that it would not make sense to send Denzel to private school; he was unlikely to dramatically change his academic achievement. In her mind, sending him to private school would transform a challenging problem into a challenging and expensive problem. Mrs. Carol did not consider private or religious schools for Denzel, nor did she consider magnet schools because "with his grades, he wouldn't get in." Mrs. Carol's thinking exemplifies the type of connections that parents made between achievement history and potential schools.

Selective and tuition-based schools were often perceived to be "better," "more challenging" schools. Children with stronger academic histories were seen as more likely to do well in a challenging school. Their parents tended to consider more selective or tuition-based schools. Parents whose children had less positive academic histories generally explained that they did not want to set their children up for failure. Parents who backed away from "challenging" schools did not think they were choosing from a set of inferior schools. Instead, they thought the schools they considered would meet their child's needs if the child put forth the appropriate effort. It is

worth noting that there were a handful of parents who deliberately chose a challenging school in an attempt to gain access to better teachers and more resources for their academically struggling child. But this was not the norm.

Consistent with national trends, poor and working-class Weldon children were less academically successful than their middle-class peers (Table 3).[12] Although parents of all social-class backgrounds were generally positive about their children, middle-class parents reported higher achievement levels than did poor and working-class parents. Middle-class parents had 5.2 greater odds of reporting their child was having a successful academic year as compared with poor and working-class parents. Middle-class parents also had 7.1 greater odds of reporting their child earned mostly As or As and Bs, as compared with poor and working-class parents.[13]

DISCUSSION

This article set out to open the black box of the choice process by looking at parents' choice sets, the construction of those choice sets and variation across parents. It has shown that parents of varying social class backgrounds had different choice sets that were not explained by the processes or reasoning they used to construct their choice sets. Instead, the resources parents used to construct their choice sets constrained the schools they were willing to consider along existing boundaries of social inequality. Although it remains important to scrutinize the number of high-quality schools available to parents, these findings suggest we must also scrutinize the constraining influence of the choice set so that all parents consider the options that are available.

These findings support the importance of both heuristics and bounded rationality in understanding parents' choice processes. No parent considered all the grade appropriate schools in Weldon. Every parent's search was bounded in some way. The application of Hossler and Gallagher's model of the choice process suggests that some parents did not search at all—stopping at the predisposition phase—some searched a little, and others searched exhaustively. In the search and choice stages, parents' processes and reasoning were similarly diverse across social classes. These findings raise an important question: How do similar choice processes and reasoning lead to different choice set composition for parents in different social classes?

The answer has to do with the socio-historical nature of choice. Specifically, the resources most used by parents to construct choice sets—social networks, customary enrollment patterns, and understanding of student achievement—were inextricably linked to the current distribution of educational opportunities. This distribution is uneven and disadvantages poor children and children of color (e.g., Oakes, 1990). In the case of social networks, middle-class parents' networks included education professionals, doctors, lawyers, and so on, who are likely to have the type of social capital (e.g., information and prestige) that facilitates school choice. With respect to enrollment patterns, poor and working-class children already attend schools that have

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[12]Their success was measured both by the grades parents' reported and by parents' overall assessment of the child's academic success in the current school year.

[13]The odds of an outcome is the number of "A" outcomes divided by the number of "B" outcomes. The odds ratio is the odds for the first group divided by the odds for the second group. An odds ratio of 1 indicates the outcome is equally likely in both groups. An odds ratio greater than 1 indicates the outcome is more likely in the first group. And an odds ratio less than 1 indicates that the outcome is less likely in the first group. Odds ratios are used as an effect size indicator.

lower teaching quality and offer increasingly impoverished curricular options (Kozol, 2005). Customary enrollment patterns will include more of these schools for poor and working-class children than middle-class children. Finally, children of color and White and Asian children do not achieve at the same levels (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Thus, parents' assessment of their children's academic history operates in a system that advantages middle-class students and their families (Delpit, 1995; Lareau, 1989, 2003).

It seems relatively innocuous to note that parents' choices are bounded. But when you consider how existing social inequalities shaped those bounds through the almost invisible influence of resources, the significance of that bounding becomes clearer. The structural inequalities in social networks, enrollment patterns, and academic histories are compelling and under-documented factors in parents' decision making. Even if choice causes schools to improve across the board, we have no reason to believe these resources will operate more equitably or become less relevant to choice set construction.

The extent of this bounding is also important given the purposeful sample upon which this study is based. The sample is biased toward parents who opted out of their traditional public schools, and as such, it likely overestimates the average parent's agency in school choice. If factors associated with social class play an important role in these parents' choice sets, it is possible that the choice sets of parents who have not historically opted out of traditional schools may differ even more dramatically along social class lines. This possibility raises questions about how parents' choices are going to reform our schooling system. Further, it suggests that policy makers should consider ways to intervene in the structural inequality inherent in the resources parents draw on to construct choice sets. For example, directing accurate schooling information, which addresses parents' concerns about prior achievement, academic excellence, and holistic views of children, into church, neighborhood, and school networks may decrease the inequalities documented in these parents' choice sets.

This study also generates new questions. These questions will require studies that make use of large, representative samples to explore the demand side of the market. Such studies would allow us to answer questions like: Do choice sets and their construction differ by sector (i.e., private, public, etc.)? How do local geographies and choice policies shape the demand for particular forms of school choice? What do choice sets look like in representative samples? As scholars move forward, it will be instructive to consider recent scholarship on the role of parental involvement in academic achievement. Increasingly complex applications of social and cultural capital theories have facilitated new understandings in this area (e.g., Horvat et al., 2003; Lareau, 2003) and the application of such theories to parental choice may be similarly generative.

CONCLUSION

For choice to enhance equity, parents must select from schools of varying quality. This study found that poor and working-class parents did not choose from schools that ranged in quality. The schools they selected from were relatively uniform: failing, nonselective, and free. Middle-class parents' choice sets were relatively uniform as well: nonfailing and selective. These data suggest that one assumption upon which the logic of choice rests may be flawed. Further, the study nominates an additional constraint on parental decision making—inequality in the resources parents use to construct choice sets.

Schooling markets are often perceived to be open, unbiased, and fair. It is suggested that if we simply give parents choice, they will select the best school from the set that exists. But this straightforward logic does not account for the social and historical factors that shape parents' decision making. Although the supply of quality schools matters, if choice is to deliver significant equity gains, our policies must take better account of the almost invisible social and historical inequities that constrain the schools parents are willing to consider.

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