Reconsidering School Choice and Equal Educational Opportunity

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In sync with the growth of voucher, charter school, and open enrollment policies over the last two decades, philosophers of education have debated the merits of school choice with respect to equal educational opportunity (EEO). An early conjecture held that increased accessibility to high quality education through parental choice policies could offer an avenue to transform the exclusion and segregation that have long characterized affluent families' choices of coveted neighborhoods and private schools. Extensive empirical research has since found, however, that the policies have resulted in increased school segregation by social class, race, and attributed ability, without an overall change in academic outcomes.[1] Yet because relatively little research has examined *how* parents' choices result in increased segregation, the philosophical debate has centered on a weighing of broad outcomes against abstract ideals of EEO. Without a solid footing in the experiential realities of parental choice, philosophers have left assumptions about parental decision-making processes unquestioned.[2] This results in missing contextual information that could impact conclusions about how best to advance EEO in school choice systems.

I argue that attention to parents' actual choice processes offers deeper understandings of how current school choice policies result in increased school segregation, which can in turn inform the view of EEO that should guide school choice policy-making. Scholars such as Lois André-Bechely, Courtney Bell, Ellen Brantlinger, Camille Wilson Cooper, Andrea Dyrness, Amy Stuart Wells, and Terri Wilson have offered valuable insights on sociological processes that reproduce and resist structural relations of power in school choice systems, as well as the emergence of solidarity and self-determination that can occur in what Wilson calls "distinctive schools of choice" that are centered on "culture, language and aspects of group identity."[3] To these voices I add the findings from my own study on parental decision-making processes, and consider the implications for EEO.

I begin by reviewing the egalitarian debate on school choice couched in the frameworks of EEO that ground differing views about the policy. I then offer insights into actual parental choice processes through a brief review of the findings of my own study. I conclude by reflecting on the understandings gained through my examination of the non-ideal conditions of school choice, and argue that a participatory view may be a means to reconcile school choice with EEO.

Egalitarian Views on School Choice and Equal Educational Opportunity

Harry Brighouse argues that regulated forms of parental choice may be a desirable alternative to a segregated system of residential and private school choice, and challenges egalitarian skeptics to show that school choice policies do worse for EEO than the status quo or feasible alternatives.[4] Brighouse, Adam Swift, William Koski, and Rob Reich defend meritocratic views of EEO, broadly echoing John

Rawls's principles of justice in which policies should prioritize the interests of the least advantaged, and that any inequalities should only reflect talent and effort.[5] In line with this ideal, the authors claim that in order to advance equal opportunities, students from low-income families or with identified disabilities require a larger share of educational resources. While this claim in itself is well acknowledged, the authors' focus on a targeted distribution of resources reflects a compensatory inter-pretation of EEO that assumes agreement on what educational outcomes are "worth wanting" despite the marginalization of many groups in defining those outcomes.[6]

Like Rawls, Brighouse and Swift in particular recognize that the family, broadly defined, is a source of inequalities yet contributes importantly to human flourish-ing.[7] Specifically, parental partiality allows more advantaged parents to use their resources to advance their children's interests, which can come at the expense of less advantaged children's opportunities. Brighouse and Swift therefore interrogate the moral boundaries of parenting with respect to EEO. They reason that certain parenting practices that cultivate an intimate parent-child relationship but might disadvantage others — such as reading bedtime stories — fall within the bounds of "legitimate partiality," while other parental actions — such as sending one's child to an elite school — constitute "excessive partiality" that could be substituted by other relationship-fostering practices at a less extreme expense to others' opportunities.[8]

For Brighouse and Swift, then, there is a role for public policy, as well as a moral responsibility on the part of parents to constrain their actions in order to ensure that school choice does not negatively impact EEO. Because Brighouse argues that the goal of education is to facilitate children's future autonomy in choosing a way of life that they endorse, he further qualifies that parents' rights to choose are "conditional … on the interests of the children themselves."[9] Policy limits should likewise ensure heterogeneous school populations as "children will be better able to live well if they are able rationally to compare different ways of life," unless, in certain contexts, school desegregation would harm the educational prospects of the least advantaged.[10]

Other scholars, including Elizabeth Anderson, Amy Gutmann, Ken Howe, and Debra Satz, have articulated a view of EEO that prioritizes political equality over (but including) material equality. This view of educational equality requires that all students are educated to a minimum level of knowledge and skills needed for authentic political participation, above which there is freedom for different educational outcomes within limits needed to maintain justice.[11] These scholars stress the importance of heterogeneous school communities, citing both the documented benefits of diverse educational settings and the need to cultivate skills for democratic citizenship that include dialogue among diverse perspectives. They are therefore skeptical that current school choice policies can advance EEO given the resulting increased segregation as well as the harm done to the democratic aims of education by the prevailing market mentality toward schooling.[12] Howe further points out that even the best-designed urban systems "skim the least disadvantaged of qualifying students," worsening the educational experiences and outcomes of the most disadvantaged left behind.[13] When the system increasingly results in a disparity of options for schooling, parents who otherwise might be concerned with EEO are put in a position of choosing between

extremes of highly-resourced and under-resourced schools for their children.[14] To avoid the flight that leaves the least advantaged in the most under-resourced schools, such disparities need to be prevented by less insistence on market-based solutions and more thorough attention to what policies can best foster equality.[15]

As I have suggested, disagreements on the effects of school choice on EEO have had to rely on the predominant discourse regarding what educational experiences and outcomes are deemed valuable. In addition, proposed solutions have been limited to those that reflect formal and compensatory conceptions of EEO such as increasing access to choice through information and transportation and incentivizing schools to be heterogeneous through an equitable distribution of funding. Better understandings of the actual processes of parental choice that lead to concerning outcomes such as segregation can importantly inform the debate on the effects of school choice on EEO and conjointly what EEO itself entails.

SCHOOL CHOICE ON THE GROUND

As noted above, André-Bechely, Bell, Brantlinger, Cooper, Dyrness, Wells, and Wilson have contributed valuable insights into what Cooper calls the "positioned choice" that characterizes parents' decision-making in school choice systems.[16] That is, the standpoint of the parent reflects a crucially different set of "motivations and behavior depending on how her social class, gender, and racial or ethnic identities are positioned in the system."[17] These scholars illuminate the perspectives of African-American, Latina and Somali immigrants, and working-class mothers who empower themselves to address inadequate schooling for their children, as well as those of European-American and middle-class mothers whose perspectives often reveal stereotypes of working-class families and the schools that they attend. Just as Annette Lareau describes middle-class families' practices of "concerted cultivation," in which parents are highly involved in schools and actively foster their children's talents and interests, empirical studies have shown that empowered parents are able to effectively negotiate their children's participation in educational practices and policies that serve to advantage them.[18]

In the 2011–2012 academic year, I examined parents' choice processes in a suburban district with an open enrollment system that a previous study found to exacerbate segregation.[19] I conducted two individual interviews and five focus groups with 35 parents from East County, where district schools had suffered most from flight (twenty-seven European-American mothers, two Asian-American mothers, and six Latino/a parents of whom four were working-class).[20] The ethnic representation of participants reflected the district population, but consistent with much school choice research, participants were disproportionately female, middle-class, and highly educated.

Like Lareau's portrayal, middle-class participants' lives revolved around their kids' many activities, with children highly involved in the school choice process.[21] All middle-class mothers volunteered in their children's schools or on district committees and interacted frequently with teachers and administrators, whom they viewed as partners in their children's education. Through their active involvement, middle-class mothers had the advantage of accessing insider information about the

qualities of various schools as well as open enrollment procedures. Well-resourced social networks formed around children's many extracurricular activities were likewise an important source of information. Differences in the advantages gained through a parenting style of "concerted cultivation" were clear to the four Latino/a working-class participants, who expressed that they had purposefully adopted middle-class practices of meeting with teachers and advocating for their children in order to "empower" themselves in an unequal system. They additionally lamented the ways in which their children were disserved, including the persistence of the achievement gap and highly disproportionate dropout rates, how gifted programs disadvantaged their kids, and experiences of Latino boys being stereotyped as trouble makers from the outset (two of the four had boys who dropped out). Yet although clear differences existed in middle-class and Latino/a working-class parents' experiences and positioning, parents' goals for their children's education were closely related to values they had internalized in their own upbringing, which did not fall solely across lines of social class or ethnic identity.

In contrast to the predominant assumption of a rational choice model in which decision-makers seek to optimize their preferences through full information, behavioral economist Herbert Simon importantly theorized that in complex situations, decision-makers operate under "bounded rationality" in which they seek to meet a minimum standard defined by their aspirational level.[22] Interestingly, both types of decision-making were present in my study — but important differences existed between those who reflected a rational choice model of optimizing and those who reflected Simon's model of "satisficing" with regard to a minimum standard. In addition, in evaluating which schools would meet their goals, both optimizers and satisficers engaged in an analytic style of comparing data and relied on their intuition. In fact, parents of all stripes emphasized the importance of a school feeling "welcoming and comfortable," which they often gained through an intuitive sense of "the right fit" when visiting school open houses. And as it turns out, that feeling of comfort coincided strongly with finding a community of "people like us." In what follows, I detail three distinct positions and choice patterns of three groups of like-minded parents in East County who I characterized as "seeking the best," "preserving the neighborhood," and "defending diverse schools."

The thirteen parents "seeking the best" were mostly unaware of their specific neighborhood schools when they chose their residence, but purposefully moved into a high-performing district and knew that open enrollment was an option. Indeed, the idea of choosing schools was an unquestioned assumption — one-third had gone to private schools themselves, and almost all claimed they would either move or send their children to private schools if they were unsatisfied (and some did). Despite their own relatively strong academic opportunities, many lamented not being challenged enough in school, and recognized the difference that a superior education made in expanding one's life choices. Because education was a path to maximizing their children's opportunities, they would settle for nothing short of academic excellence. It was similarly highly important that their children seemed happy and fulfilled in school. To this end, parents sought teachers who would provide highly individualized

instruction, and a community of peers who likewise were interested in academic rigor and reflected their values for politeness and avoidance of risky behavior. They acknowledged the value of socioeconomically and ethnically diverse schools, especially as preparation for the workplace, but admitted it was a low priority. As optimizers, these parents engaged in active research, but also stressed the importance of their own intuition. Interestingly, this was the only group to make strategic use of insider information through calculated moves to increase their chances of getting into their optimal school through the lottery system.

Most of the ten parents "preserving the neighborhood" specifically chose their residence for the reputation of the high-achieving neighborhood elementary school. Although these parents highly valued neighborhood schools and wished to remain with their local community, concerns about bullying and poor administration at the middle school had begun to surface (despite its relatively affluent population and high test scores). Some elementary school teachers specifically advised against the neighborhood middle school and suggested other schools for some of their children — creating a high level of stress for parents who emphasized they had no interest in playing the game of finding "the best" school, but now were concerned whether their neighborhood school was "good enough." Reflecting on their positive memories of growing up with many neighborhood friends, they disliked open enrollment and lamented the loss of neighborhood communities. They most wanted their children to receive a well-rounded education that inspired a lifelong love of learning and community involvement, and sought a local community of peers that was inclusive and involved. Many wished their children's schools were more diverse and recognized inequities in the district, especially with regard to financial differences caused by parental fundraising.

The twelve parents "defending diverse schools" were mostly unaware of their neighborhood schools when they chose their residence, but had ties to the East County area through family or friends. Like the neighborhood group, these parents expressed that they wanted their children to have a well-rounded education that did not have to be "the best." For these parents, however, a socioeconomic and ethnically diverse environment was essential to becoming a well-rounded person, and important enough to set a minimum standard for what they found to be acceptable. Five of the six Latino/a parents fell in this group, explaining that it was not only important that their children had peers and teachers who "looked like them," but also that teachers valued the diverse experiences of all students. The remaining parents in this group emphasized the values they had learned from parents who valued diversity, or from the loss they felt growing up in a homogeneous environment. This group tended to have a deeper understanding of the benefits of diverse schools, such as the value of learning from diverse perspectives, and for Latino/a students, developing pride in one's cultural identity. What this group felt to be a comfortable environment, then, was one in which people were down to earth, where all were welcome, and where all kids were supported and respected. Although most of the Latino/a parents liked the idea of having a choice, parents in this group lamented the loss of neighborhood communities and were highly concerned about the impact of open enrollment on

equity, including flight from under-resourced schools. All but one of the Latino/a parents had enrolled their children in the more affluent, higher-achieving East County schools, only to return to neighborhood schools when palpable socioeconomic differences were a source of discomfort for them and their children.

My characterization of these three groups of parents is not meant to imply that individuals fell immutably into one camp or that one set of perspectives was more respectable than another. Indeed, as a mother of children in the district, I have at times resonated with and made choices in line with each of these groups. Yet the different experiences and positioning of these broadly defined groups highlight the ways in which parents separate themselves, and in turn their children, into communities of like-minded peers.[23] In fact, parents were so accustomed to associating with like-minded others, that for many, their participation in the study was motivated by the unique opportunity to attend focus groups of parents with diverse experiences and perspectives. At every focus group, parents who I've since characterized as "defending diverse schools" brought up their concerns about a lack of equity in the open enrollment system. Participants reflected on post-questionnaires that they benefited from hearing new perspectives, and two-thirds of participants — especially those from the "seeking the best" and "preserving neighborhood schools" groups — indicated an expanded understanding of equity issues. While a mere beginning, these outcomes suggest a possibility that diverse community dialogues could be constructive toward better-informed parental perspectives and policymaking.

Reflecting on School Choice on the Ground and Equal Educational Opportunity

The findings from my study echo the wealth of literature on patterns of increased segregation in school choice systems and the influence of middle-class parents' "cultural capital" in navigating advantageous paths for their children.[24] Yet my more nuanced look reveals that social class differences do not tell the full story. First, school choice policy as currently conceived assumes the preference-maximizing behavior that only characterized one group of participants. What is more, the optimizing parents' advantageous position in the system resulted in the creation of elite schools that drained parents from neighborhood schools. In attempting to curb this flight, the district implemented Talented and Gifted (TAG), Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), and International Baccalaureate (IB) focus programs in each of the East County schools. While somewhat effective in retaining some of the more affluent families, the programs have not effectively reduced the achievement gap, Latino/a dropout rate, and other concerns of the longstanding Latino/a communities in the area.[25] At the same time, the group of parents for whom diversity was an essential characteristic of their children's schools — which included those who were arguably the least advantaged in the district — were confined to choosing among under-resourced schools suffering from flight.

Yet common, compensatory solutions to improving the opportunities of the least advantaged in school choice systems, such as providing transportation, expanding information and needed services, and offering preferences in the lottery, while of course necessary for the most basic level of access, address only a formal

opportunity to participate. The assumption is that equal access would allow families who now remain in under-resourced schools to enroll in "the best" schools of academic excellence, such that schools would become more heterogeneous while maintaining parental autonomy. But my findings showed that even without constraints, parents would differ with regard to their aspirations that are deep seated in intergenerational values. And parents' life experiences informed an intuitive sense of comfort among like-minded others that was in turn central to their choices. While some parents' comfort zones would constitute "excessive partiality" for Brighouse and Swift, it seems unrealistic for these parents to contradict their intuition and constrain their choices without a deeper understanding of the importance of doing so, and without some level of comfort in a more diverse community. As Daniel Kahneman suggests, engaging in reflection can interrogate assumptions that can be hidden in intuitive assessments.[26]

Further measures to ensure that all schools are heterogeneous likewise fail to address the perspectives of the least advantaged as long as the educational system maintains the status quo of programs that serve the interests of the most advantaged with no substantial change in issues such as the achievement gap, dropout rate, and stereotyping of Latino boys. But changing the status quo means understanding the concerns and perspectives of the least advantaged, whose voices have long been marginalized in the system. And the most promising way to address those concerns is to ensure equal participation in articulating pathways to desired educational outcomes.

Dialogue across perspectives, then, is essential not only to the formation of policy that effectively benefits the least advantaged, but also to the expanded understandings of parents participating in the system. Although five of the six Latino/a parents in my study liked the idea of school choice, none of them felt their community had a respected voice in district policy. Three of these parents, who were well-recognized community leaders, reflected on their past participation in organized movements to effect changes such as bilingual schooling. Their current activism, however, generally involved participation in what felt like superficial district offerings of Spanish-speaking parent forums, with few opportunities for cross-cultural venues. What is most important, then, is that recognition of equality begins with the inclusion of all defensible views in determining what educational experiences and outcomes are "worth wanting."[27] Because norms and skills needed for respectful dialogue vary culturally, it seems necessary to begin with something like the holistic "transcultural dialogues" advocated by AnaLouise Keating that are centered on "deep listening" and empathy.[28]

As Howe notes, the prevailing "compensatory interpretation" of EEO is inadequate in that while it rightly aims to help the least advantaged, "it implicitly adopts the status quo regarding what is of educational worth and how this is to be determined. It therefore fails to afford educational opportunities of equal worth to individuals who have had no part in shaping [them]."[29] The participatory view that Howe articulates may provide a means to disrupt the market paradigm that drives his and other egalitarians' skepticism. With equal participation in defining the character of school choice policies, together with the educational offerings that comprise the

system, it may be possible to not only advance EEO, but also deepen understandings of EEO itself.

1. Gary Orfield and Erica Frankenberg, *Educational Delusions? Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality and How to Make Schools Fair* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

2. Sigal R. Ben-Porath, "School Choice as a Bounded Ideal," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 4 (2009): 527–44.

3. Lois André-Bechely, *Could It Be Otherwise? Parents and the Inequities of Public School Choice* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Courtney Bell, "Social Class Differences in School Choice: The Role of Preferences," in *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Walter Feinberg and Christopher Lubienski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008);Ellen Brantlinger, *Dividing Classes: How the Middle Class Negotiates and Rationalizes School Advantage* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003); Camille Wilson Cooper, "School Choice as 'Motherwork': Valuing African-American Women's Educational Advocacy and Resistance," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20, no. 5 (2007): 491–512; Andrea Dyrness, *Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011); Allison Roda and Amy Stuart Wells, "School Choice Policies and Racial Segregation: Where White Parents' Good Intentions, Anxiety, and Privilege Collide," *American Journal of Education* 119, no. 2 (2013): 261–93; Irene Serna and Amy Stuart Wells, "The Politics of Culture: Understanding Local Political Resistance to Detracking in Racially Mixed Schools," *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996): 93–118; and Terri Wilson, "Contesting Dialogue: Reconsidering Charter Schools as Counterpublics," (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Studies Association, Denver, CO., September 2010).

4. Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2009): 117–28; William S. Koski and Rob Reich, "When 'Adequate' Isn't: The Retreat from Equity in Education Law and Policy and Why it Matters," *Emory Law Journal* 56, no. 3 (2006): 545–615; Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 128; and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

6. Kenneth R. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy, and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College, 1997).

7. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 511; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Family Values and School Policy: Shaping Values and Conferring Advantage," in *Education, Justice, and Democracy*, ed. Danielle Allen and Rob Reich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

8. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2008): 43–80; Adam Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (London: Routledge, 2003).

9. Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 17.

10. Ibid., 69; and Harry Brighouse, "Educational Justice and Socio-Economic Segregation in Schools," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 4 (2007): 575–90.

11. Elizabeth Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Approach," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 595–622; Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Kenneth Howe, "On Equality versus Adequacy: Principles and Normative Frameworks," in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/4044; and Debra Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623–48.

12. Kenneth Howe, "Evidence, the Conservative Paradigm, and School Choice," in *School Choice Policies and Outcomes*, ed. Feinberg and Lubienski.

13. Kenneth Howe, "On the (In)Feasibility of School Choice for Social Justice," in *Philosophy of Education 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 263, http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/1549/287.

14. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*, 127.

15. Howe, "Evidence, the Conservative Paradigm, and School Choice," 74.

16. Cooper, "School Choice as 'Motherwork,'" 508.

17. Ibid., 494.

18. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

19. Kenneth R. Howe and Margaret A. Eisenhart, "A Study of Boulder Valley School District's Open Enrollment System" (Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 2000), http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/EPIC-CopyofBVSDOEReport.pdf.

20. Interviews and focus groups of parents in Boulder Valley School District, Boulder, Colorado, conducted by author between November 2011 and February 2012. Unless citations indicate otherwise, subsequent quotations in the essay come from this research data.

21. This is not to say that there were not important differences in cultural practices across ethnicities of participants in my study. Asian-American, Latino/a, and first generation European-American parents clearly valued cultural practices related to their ethnic identities in their family lives.

22. Herbert A. Simon, "Rationality as Process and as Product of Thought," *The American Economic Review* 68, no. 2 (1978): 1–16.

23. For a history of sorting by like-mindedness, see Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

24. Roda and Wells, "School Choice Policies and Racial Segregation"; and Wells and Serna, "The Politics of Culture."

25. To calculate dropout rates, I used district-level data by gender and race/ethnicity for academic years ending 2004–2013, accessed from the Colorado Department of Education: http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/rvprioryeardropoutdata. In analyzing the data, dropout rates overall were decreasing, but the proportion of Latinos — especially male Latinos — among students who had dropped out was steadily and substantially increasing. To calculate achievement gap statistics, I used district- and school-level data by Free/Reduced Meal (FRM) eligibility and by ethnicity for academic years ending 2004–2013, accessed from the Colorado Department of Education: http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/CoAssess-DataAndResults#disaggregated. I calculated the achievement gap as the percentage proficient and advanced among "Not-FRM Eligible" students minus the percentage proficient and advanced among "FRM Eligible" students for reading, writing, and math. The difference between the two was decreasing so slightly that a trend line analysis showed that a continuation of the past ten years' rate of progress would take anywhere from 43 to 63 more years to eliminate the gap in each content area. Results for the white–Latino achievement gap were similar.

26. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

27. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*, 31.

28. AnaLouise Keating, *Teaching for Transformation: Transcultural Classroom Dialogues* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

29. Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity*, 31.