

“It’s As Political A Choice As You’ll Ever Make”:

A Qualitative Case Study Of Middle-Class, White Parents Navigating School Choice

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For Beth

None of this would have been possible if not for you.

To Ronan

“Keep a little fire burning; however small, however hidden.”

— **Cormac McCarthy**, *The Road*

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Abstract

For the better part of three decades, charter schools have been seen as a successful bipartisan solution to the difficulties plaguing the American education system. While much of the political rhetoric surrounding school choice suggests an overwhelming influence on public education and that it has either been a resounding success or a total failure, the reality is slightly more muddled. In order to see that muddled reality more clearly, in this dissertation I utilize qualitative case study methodology to investigate the ways in which neoliberal language manifests itself in the way three white, middle-class families in Tennessee perceive public and charter school quality, as well as discuss their overall opinions of American education. It was my hope that by studying the perceptions of parents regarding school quality and any neoliberal rhetoric that might affect these perceptions, I could begin to understand the politically charged rhetoric in support of and against school choice in comparison to what is actually important to the families dealing most with its existence.

These three parents utilized three different methods of school choice in an effort to achieve the best possible public education for their children. These parents enrolled their child[ren] in a charter school, relocated to a new school zone, and/or utilized within district transfers. Overall, the parents held a high esteem for public education, in some cases working for years to find a high quality traditional public school for their children. Parents also displayed significant skepticism of charter schools and school choice reforms on a national level, but trusted these institutions and procedures when they had a proven, local record of success. That being said, these parents affirmed that their first choice for education would be a strong and robust traditional public school system, even if they were reticent to outright state an opposition to school choice. These findings suggest that parents would prefer more funding and effort be

put in to fixing traditional public schools than enforcing and expanding school choice reforms informed by neoliberal economic theory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Having previously taught at a charter school with a mission to prepare first-generation college students for success in higher education, I saw firsthand the subtle policies and practices schools of choice employ to promote an image of success. We boasted a 100 percent graduation rate, but failed to note that while our incoming freshmen classes were roughly 100 students, our graduating classes of seniors hovered between 30 and 40. We boasted that 100 percent of our graduating seniors were accepted to and attended 4-year colleges, but failed to clarify that many dropped out within a year or two. These examples of our success were parroted by local, state, and national politicians representing our city and state along with the rich donors who spent their time and money to help the marginalized Black and Brown¹ students who made up nearly all of our student population.

While technically accurate statements, these talking points were then further parroted to the parents of prospective students in our advertising and efforts to increase enrollment. Many of the parents of our students compared this information against the reputation of the local, struggling public school system, which faced many of the same dilemmas other rust-belt public school systems did (Eastman, 2018). While the successes and failures of schools of choice are often the focus of school choice focused research (the standardized testing movement and the focus on quantifiable results being a result of neoliberalism itself), I found myself drawn towards the rhetoric behind the movement as requiring more specific inquiry. More than anything else,

¹ Racial descriptions throughout this dissertation follow the capitalization conventions set forth by Johnson (2018) in “Where do we go from here? Toward a Critical Race English Education.”

the rhetoric of school choice superiority seemed to effect the actual parents more than anything, making the decisions to send their students to my former school instead of a traditional public school.

Right as I was starting my doctoral studies and began more intently researching the notion of neoliberalism, Betsy DeVos was thrust into the public limelight through her widely covered and debated nomination hearing. This hearing was heavily steeped in neoliberal rhetoric and my focus shifted towards wondering if neoliberal education rhetoric was at all a part of the motivation behind parents' decision-making process to determine whether or not to enroll their students at schools of choice.

While much of the political rhetoric surrounding school choice suggests an overwhelming influence on public education and that it has either been a resounding success or a total failure, the reality is slightly more muddled. Charter proponents note increased test scores, attendance, high school graduation rates, and college acceptance rates, but critics contend that these data are cherry-picked solely to push a pro-charter agenda (Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018, Tienken, 2013). It is my hope that by studying parents' perceptions of school quality and any neoliberal rhetoric at play in these assessments of charter and traditional public schools, I can begin to understand the politically charged rhetoric in support of and against school choice in comparison to what is actually important to the families affected most by its existence (Logan, 2018; Scott, 2014). If parents' perceptions of quality are affected by neoliberal philosophy, then more in-depth and specific research could be completed in an attempt to understand the origin of these neoliberal beliefs about education and how it affects their decision making processes. Understanding the origins of these decision-making factors and beliefs would then also be a first

step towards understanding how best to educate parents of the reality of school choice divorced from the politically charged and biased rhetoric both for and against it.

Context: The American School Choice Movement

There have been different policy beliefs within the school choice movement, but, in the United States, school choice plays out largely in two major forms: charter schools and voucher programs. Each of these school choice models have unfolded in similar and yet very different ways, given the complexity of American education policy, the whims of American politics, and many of the decisions being made at state and local levels (Thomas, 2010). Proponents of school choice hinge their arguments, at least publicly, on exactly what its name suggests – choice between schools, which they argue through the free market capitalist system causes schools deemed as ineffective to close, because no parents or guardians will want to send their children to failing schools (Dee Lea, 2017; Friedman & Friedman, 1980).

However, skeptics of the school choice movement point out political, financial, and religious interests and gains as being the true motivations behind voucher programs and charter schools (Gutman, 2000; Kuhn, 2014; Lakoff, 2008). Due to the school choice movement's ties to neoliberal economic theories, the two issues of neoliberalism and school choice must be understood together in order grasp how school choice has evolved in recent American history and how it is currently understood.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism as a larger economic and political philosophy hinges primarily around several key tenets: free market rule over any kind of government regulation, cutting of public expenditure for social programs, pulling away government regulation on anything that could negatively affect the free market, letting private enterprise rather than the government run any

service that is currently under public control, and valuing individual responsibility over considerations of the public good as a collective (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Harvey, 2007; Martinez & Garcia, 1998). Essentially, the argument behind neoliberalism is that free-market capitalism is the only common sense and ethical economic structure through which all aspects of society should be understood and governed (Harvey, 2007; Scott, 2014).

The neoliberal position argues that the aforementioned social programs and focus on the public good create an unaffordable and unsustainable welfare state that creates dependency on government and further unchecked expansion of state programs, thus increasing the power and scope of government, resulting in totalitarian states (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Harvey, 2007; Lakoff, 2008). It is important to note that this did not happen as a result of a populist movement, but rather through the concerted efforts of a few, select individuals.

Friedman and Hayek. One of the largest influences on modern American neoliberal politics and economics was Milton Friedman. Neoliberalism began strengthening and expanding its hold on American politics following Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and the new era of Conservative policies that Reagan helped usher in. This effectively ended the more progressive policies that had been in place since FDR's New Deal following the Great Depression (Harvey, 2007; Journell, 2011). Friedman was a key economic advisor to Reagan throughout his presidency, ushering neoliberalism into mainstream politics throughout the 1980s (Fitzner, 2017; Harvey, 2007). Serving as a counterpoint to the more progressive and state-involved Keynesian style of economics, Friedman (1980) hinged his argument primarily on an extension of classic liberal economics, largely Adam Smith's work, and argued that 20th century government expansion was the cause of much of society's ailments rather than the solution to them.

In continuing Smith's reasoning, Friedman (1980, 1995) argued for a massive reduction in government, primarily because of his insistence that issues with the free market were no worse than existing issues within government intervention into economics and that perceived failures of the market were due to the government's intervention rather than its lack of oversight.

Additionally, Friedman (1980) pushed for a return to late 19th century economic growth that he believed was free from government intervention. Dependent upon this argument, however, is his dismissal of the 19th century as an era of exploitation of the poor by the rich and that well-known tales of robber barons are nothing more than stories used to argue for the expansion of government and government intervention in the private sector.

Neoliberals contend that the cure for all of this is for an individual to have a voice in all aspects of society and the integral component of said voice is their economic power to spend. In outlining the effects neoliberalism has on education, Davies and Bansel (2007) noted a key aspect was that, "All human actors to be governed are conceived of as individuals active in making choices in order to further their own interests and those of their family. The powers of the state are thus directed at empowering entrepreneurial subjects in their quest for self-expression, freedom and prosperity" (pp. 249-250). Essentially, the role and power of the government is limited strictly to ensuring that the private citizen is responsible for making all of their own decisions on social goods through economic means, not relying on the government for those services themselves. Consequently, all government decisions and policies should be towards maximizing the potential for profit, because neoliberal economic policy posits that "human welfare is best advanced by the maximization of commercial freedoms within an institutional structure characterized by individual liberty, private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Scott, 2014, p. 272).

While Friedman's economic policies were growing in popularity in some academic economic circles the United States, Friedrich von Hayek was on a parallel course in Austria. Like Friedman, Hayek saw government expansion as dangerous and coercive and saw government intervention as a reduction of freedom and liberty. For Hayek, this loss of freedom would result in an oppressive society where the common citizen would be reduced to a life of serfdom (Harvey, 2007; Letizia, 2015; McDonald, 2014; Olsen, 2018). While much of Europe was turning to more socialized forms of government to rebuild following World War II, Hayek contented that these efforts towards increased equality were in fact nothing more than the private citizens' servitude towards centralized government.

Hayek is noted for his assessment that the adoption of neoliberal, free-market principles was an issue of building ideas and it would be an effort spanning generations before neoliberal policies would take hold in Europe and the United States. This effort would be one of transforming the public's views, beliefs, and philosophy on economics and the government. This foresight was instrumental in wealthy citizens and corporations funding independent think tank organizations and embedding neoliberal philosophies in media organizations throughout the latter 20th century. Together, independent think tanks and conservative media influence collectively worked to disseminate these beliefs to the public until and through the 1980s when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher instituted sweeping neoliberal reform in their respective countries. The neoliberal influence holds to this day (Fitzner, 2017; Harvey, 2007; McDonald, 2014).

Pushback against neoliberalism and Human Capital. As neoliberal thought was increasing throughout America and Western Europe in the late 1970s, Michel Foucault (2008) gave lectures tracking the history of neoliberal thought as a mode of power and theorizing what

he saw as the inevitable consequences of its proliferation. Rather than the freedom promised by neoliberalism through whole-hearted adoption of free-market practices, Foucault predicted a paralysis of freedom with one's whole focus thrust into the concern of one's ability to make choices through the making and spending of capital (Foucault, 2008; Peters, 2018). Foucault argued that if the primary foundation of neoliberal philosophy relies on the individual's ability to exert control or influence on the free market, the level of capital an individual possesses and has at their disposal becomes paramount (Foucault, 2008).

This shift in priorities results in conceptualizing people solely through their ability to earn and spend, referencing Becker's (1962) theory of human capital. Human capital is the idea that one's value is the level of capital they have at their disposal in order to influence the market (Becker, 1962; Kopecky, 2011; Zimmerman, 2018). Consequently, those who are incapable or unwilling to participate in the market are framed as being lazy, unmotivated, or leeching off of others due to their own immorality (Mitrovic, 2005). It should be noted, however, that Foucault's lectures are not an outright condemnation of neoliberalism, but more of a historical archeology of the philosophy, its power structures, and forecasts some potential consequences of government-sponsored neoliberalism (Laval, 2017; Peters, 2018).

Pierre Bourdieu (1998), writing roughly two decades later, was far more critical and overt in his analysis of neoliberal thought. Writing after the ends of Reagan's and Thatcher's tenures, Bourdieu lived through the adoption of neoliberal principles in the Western world, seeing many of the effects of philosophy transformed into policy. In his essay, Bourdieu immediately pointed out the discourse of modern economics positioning itself as objectively true and scientifically rigorous. Bourdieu resisted this notion, however, and noted that modern neoliberal economics were anything but, and instead was the fictitious presentation of a neoliberal utopia

masquerading as political problem (Laval, 2017; Peters, 2018). The problem, as Bourdieu (1998) stated it, is the goal of creating a utopia through “a pure and perfect market ... made possible by the politics of financial deregulation” and the “*destructive* action of all of the political measures ... that aim to *call into question any and all collective structures* that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market.”

Bourdieu (1998) also saw neoliberalism not as a means of ensuring freedom and resisting oppressive government intrusion, but as a governmental interference ensuring and building power for the wealthy, corporations, and conservative politicians arguing the immorality of social welfare programs. In order to keep this consolidation of power, Bourdieu argued it was necessary to structure citizens in a hegemonic workforce willing to engage in practices against their own self-interests, like giving up collective bargaining, accepting lower wages and harsher working conditions and hours, and competing against their peers rather than working together for the benefit of them all.

Consequently, Bourdieu argued that a thinly veiled world of social Darwinism appears and becomes normalized. He pointed to the increasing wage gap and levels of poverty as inherent products of neoliberalism, and that the invisible discourse surrounding it prevents a wide-scale closer examination of neoliberalism. This blindness prevents a resurgence and reframing of the social welfare policies and programs that could push against the omnipresence of neoliberalism in governmental programs and policies across the world (Laval, 2017; Mitrovic, 2005; Peters, 2018; Tienken, 2013).

One of the ideas Bourdieu (1998) pushed against the most was Becker’s theory of human capital (Laval, 2017; Mitrovic, 2005). While Foucault (2008) linked Becker’s theory to neoliberalism in order to explain how individuals would behave in a neoliberal system, Bourdieu

outright disparaged it (Kopecky, 2011; Mitrovic, 2005; Peters, 2018). Though the theory of human capital fits neatly into the neoliberal frame of personal responsibility and self-reliance, Bourdieu saw this as a gross oversimplification which ignored the connections between economics, government deregulation and people's social welfare (Kopecky, 2011; Laval, 2017; Mitrovic, 2005).

Discourse of failing schools. The period of neoliberal expansion throughout the 1980s also marked a dramatic shift in the conceptualization of the purpose and philosophical identity of public education. While American public schools do serve an undeniable economic function with one's prospects and quality of employability dramatically increasing with a completed high school education, a shift began to occur where this was their sole or primary purpose. The framing of schools shifted to one of economic investment. Education became a means to increase human capital (Kopecky, 2011; Mitrovic, 2005; Zimmerman, 2018).

Consequently, schools are an investment in children so that they can have a future with higher levels of capital with which to consume and produce (Becker, 1968; McDonald, 2014). The Deweyian (1916) notion of schools as the venue for students to become democratically engaged citizens was usurped by a consumer-focused mission for schools to produce people prepared to maximize their ability to acquire higher paying jobs and increase their ability to participate in the earning and spending within the free market, while being prepared to maintain the United States as an economic superpower (Bourdieu, 1998; Dewey, 1916; McDonald, 2014; Tienken, 2013; Zimmerman, 2018).

Although neoliberal arguments for a restructuring of American education was called for years before the push for the adoption of education reform became a popular political platform, much of the momentum of the school choice debate can also be traced back to the 1983

landmark document, *A Nation at Risk* (Friedman, 1955; Friedman & Friedman, 1980; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Scott, 2014). The document established several criteria and indicators pitting the success of American education against other countries, noting that American schools were underperforming compared to other nations as well as decreasing in quality over time. This simultaneously sparked fear and outrage, as well as further establishing and cementing a discourse that American public education is failing (Kuhn, 2014; Logan, 2018; McDonald, 2014; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Mixing this fear and outrage with the rhetoric that business and free-market ideologies can improve schools that were suddenly deemed failing further increased the power of the neoliberal agenda. This, along with the increased corporate wealth and political power meant that, “corporate forces now possess extensive, near monopolistic powers in re-imagining, reforming, and restricting public education” due to “corporations and corporate wealth interjecting themselves into the policymaking process as never before” (Watkins, 2004, p. 25).

School Choice

The modern incarnation of American school choice can largely be attributed to Milton Friedman (1955; 1980) and his work in bringing neoliberal economic policy to the forefront of American politics. Friedman and Friedman (1980) specifically addressed education in this context as a public service in chapter six of the popular text *Free to choose*, expanding on an earlier essay from 1955 that never gained much political traction (Logan, 2018). Friedman (1980) tracked certain aspects on the history of American education, noting Horace Mann’s influence to turn education into a public service that utilizes tax-payer money. Friedman (1980) continued this discussion of America’s education system to an even greater extent in the mid 20th century when education also began to more explicitly tackle issues of social equality and racism.

Leading up to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, school choice was positioned as a solution to ensuring educational equality for minority students. This kind of choice-based system would also allow white parents to choose to send their students to segregated schools, continuing the false notion of separate but equal (Logan, 2018).

Throughout this time period Friedman (1980) argued that while school sizes, administration and teaching staff all increased, testing scores and quality dropped. This expansion of the bureaucracy of education is attributed to a lack of liberty in choosing where and how children go to school. This lack of liberty, as defined by Friedman, was essentially a result of placing educational decisions in the hands of bureaucrats and politicians rather than in parents and the free market. Friedman's solution to the ails of public education was a voucher system. This voucher system would utilize a free market economy structure to increase enrollment in successful schools, resulting in the closure of failing schools through competition. This competition would fight back against the resistance to close schools, which was argued to be a machination of the government intervention in education and corrupted interests of teacher unions and the educational bureaucracy (Campi, 2018; Friedman, 1995; Logan, 2018).

Voucher programs. Friedman's (1955; 1980) school choice program entailed each family getting a voucher worth a specific dollar amount equal to the yearly national average of school tax per child. This money would be used solely for sending that child to any public or private school in accordance with national laws. Friedman argued that this would cause schools to compete with one another for students' enrollment fees, thus increasing the overall quality of all schools and creating a stable cost for schools (Campi, 2018; Stitzlein, 2013). This competition would be the only factor in ensuring the quality of schools, as Friedman (1980) deemed any government control or regulation on school quality as government overreach

(Logan, 2018). It should also be noted here that Friedman maintained that his voucher program was merely a concession to the American people's adherence to public education for all, and that he would prefer a complete demolition of public funding for education.

Friedman also argued for an end to any kind of compulsory education for children (Friedman & Friedman, 1980). Despite Friedman's argument for the transition to a voucher system beginning in the 1950s, little movement was made for a transition to a free market education system. There were small, regional voucher programs that existed in the period between the 1960s and 1980s in areas like San Jose, Minnesota, and Boston; however, most were short lived and focused on solely on educational funding following a student from one public school district to another nearby district of the family's choice (Friedman, 1955; Logan, 2018; McDonald, 2014).

One of the first, large-scale voucher programs to reach a level of success was the creation of thematically organized alternative schools in East Harlem. The program was created in 1974 to increase competition amongst the perceived failures of New York inner-city schools. Schools deemed as failing were shut down and reopened either as an alternative school or as a reorganized public school. The program resulted in the creation of several alternative schools in East Harlem and in increased performance when compared to other New York public schools. By the mid-1980s any East-Harlem student entering high school could have their choice of which high school to attend. (Logan, 2018; Shiller, 2011). While the NY voucher program was deemed as successful, they failed to take off on a national stage. This limited success of choice programs was pushed to the national stage following the Reagan Administration's push towards neoliberalism and the release of *A Nation at Risk* (Gilbert, 2019; Kuhn, 2014, Logan, 2018; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Moving into the 1980s, Reagan and his administration cited Friedman's voucher plan as the solution to the supposed failures of the public education system. During his presidency, three individual voucher bills were introduced to Congress but none made it through the senate. Opponents, and much of the public, pointed to Reagan's position on closing the Department of Education and Reagan's harsh neoliberal rhetoric against the poor as reasons to mistrust this change to public education (Harvey, 2007; Logan, 2018; Scott, 2014). Despite its failure on a national level, voucher programs increased in popularity throughout the 1980s, including amongst some left-leaning politicians (Jesse Jackson being one of the most notable), as they were seen as a possible solution to the economic and racial disparity between education quality and opportunity.

The pro-voucher leftist argument stemmed largely from the basis that school choice has always existed for wealthier, white parents, in that they have the economic capital and freedom to move to different cities or districts with higher quality schools (Brighthouse, 1999; Kuhn, 2014; Logan, 2018; Russakoff, 2015). However, looking back, historians have noted that these increased efforts for voucher programs equally allowed white parents to maintain or seek out predominantly white schools (Stitzlein, 2013). Continually throughout the 1980s, small local voucher programs were initiated that allowed parents to use public money to private or religious schools. The first large-scale, statewide initiative occurred in Minnesota in 1988, which allowed any student to attend any public high school in the state (Campi, 2018; Logan, 2018).

The emphasis on American education existing under state and local control makes tracking the adoption and status of voucher programs at all of the various levels an expansive project. In short, Wisconsin became the first state to adopt a voucher program in the modern era of school systems, allowing students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds to attend

nonreligious private schools in the Milwaukee School district in 1988. This program gained national attention by the vocal support of President George H. W. Bush. In response to failing schools in Cleveland, Ohio, the state legislature passed a voucher act in 1995 that allowed Cleveland Public Schools students to private schools regardless of having a religious affiliation or not.

Following the legal success of the Cleveland voucher program, Milwaukee extended its program to include religious private schools in 1998 (Campi, 2018; Logan, 2018; Toma & Zimmer, 2012). The first federally funded voucher program came about in 2004 in Washington D. C., providing vouchers to students from low-socio backgrounds, with students who attend schools identified as performing poorly, receiving priority. Largely, states give preferences to students of low-socioeconomic backgrounds, those who attend schools identified as failing, students from rural areas and/or students who are differently-abled (Cunningham, 2013; Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018).

One of the largest differences between voucher programs and charter school—the more popular, or at least more common forms of school choice—is that of sectarian versus parochial education. Unlike charter schools, voucher programs can, and most often do, include religious schools as long as the schools themselves do not allocate public money to specific instances of religious education—for instance, using public money for a class espousing a particular religious doctrine or service (Brighthouse, 1999; Weil, 2002). Despite many opponents to school choice hinging their arguments against voucher programs on the intermingling of public funds with private, religious institutions, federal court cases fail to exactly back up this argument, citing the large sums of money that subsidizes religious institutions through the form of tax exemption and charities (Brighthouse, 1999).

For this reason, voucher programs are often seen as being more detrimental to public education as a general concept, as many charter programs are technically operated as public institutions. Additionally, voucher programs circumvent much of any public influence or control, which is also why the staunchest supporters of neoliberal politics and those with more religiously oriented motivations support them. However, opponents argue they directly cause a negative effect on the public schools, especially those in school districts serving people of lower socioeconomic status and people of color (Abernathy, 2005; Gilbert, 2019; Stitzlein, 2013).

Charter programs. After the slow moving momentum and success of voucher programs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, school choice proponents changed gears and developed the concept of charter schools in the early 1990s, beginning with eight charter schools authorized in Minnesota in 1991. Charter schools were initially envisioned as schools opened by groups of teachers that operated slightly outside the existing districts so that they would not be beholden to the high levels of regulations the public schools were. The legislation in Minnesota began a snowball of states allowing charter schools to intermingle with their existing public school programs and districts, resulting in over 1,100 charter schools in America by 1998 (Logan, 2018; Toma & Zimmer, 2012; Weil, 2009).

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, charters received large bipartisan support, even being codified into national law with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 passed under former President Bush (also known as NCLB). Schools that consistently failed to meet certain levels of standards and growth outlined by NCLB were required to close, and one of the reopening options was to reform under the control of charter or private management companies (Logan, 2018; Scott, 2014; Toma & Zimmer, 2012). The Race to the Top legislation of 2009 passed under former President Obama (also known as RttT), included a similar provision for schools

competing for the funding. If schools within the state were continually underperforming according to RttT standards, one option was for that school to close and have control of it passed over to a charter management organization (Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018; Scott, 2014).

Charter schools rose in popularity partially because they still work within the confines of the public sector, although with often much less oversight and regulation than traditional public school systems, again with the ideology that the free market principals of choice will control quality and ensure that students are receiving the best education possible (Berends, 2015; Toma & Zimmer, 2012; Weil, 2009). However, critics point to the economic failings of industries that have had massive deregulation as indicators that this ideology will have cause similar failings in education, including a lack of promised student expectations and an increase in the disparity of education between different status of marginalized statuses, and more affluent, white students (Eastman, Anderson & Boyles, 2016; Lakoff, 2008).

Charter schools are currently even more complicated and popular than voucher programs. Just as with voucher programs, charter schools were purportedly designed to provide parents with choices on where to send their children to school, particularly parents from poverty-stricken school districts labeled as low-performing (Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018; Weil, 2009). However, along with voucher programs, charter schools also have the direct effect of placing more value on the concepts of consumer choice and free market ideology as a means to secure equity, rather than utilizing social welfare as a means to fight for the social good (Campi, 2018; Eastman, Anderson, & Boyles, 2016; Gilbert, 2019; Stitzlein, 2013).

Without the intermingling of private and public money and further being compounded by the subject of religion as voucher programs, charter school expansion particularly promises, “flexibility and innovation in public education reform” but critics describe that those terms

“serve as euphemisms for the rollback of the twentieth century’s most important efforts at achieving equity and social justice in public schools,” many of the same criticisms leveled against the voucher programs (Eastman, Anderson, & Boyles, 2016, p. 62).

A further complication of charter school programs is that arguments of local control are giving way to massive for-profit, education management organizations (EMOs) and non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs). These organizations run charter networks that typically do not adhere to normal school district boundaries, with roughly 12% of charters being run by an EMO and roughly 20% run by a CMO. Additionally, the large bulk (over 90%) of charter programs are relatively newly founded, directly competing with traditional public schools for students, rather than working within the confines and parameters of existing school districts (Berends, 2015, Gilbert, 2019; Stitzlein, 2013).

Although critics see this directly as an assault on public education, proponents argue that these are indications of charter programs and school choice models working as intended. Charters pull students, many of whom are of a marginalized status, out of schools deemed as failing and place them in charter programs. However, there are many critics who call into question the purported success of charter schools educating these students any better than public schools (Eastman, Anderson, & Boyles, 2016; Hatch, 2015; Kuhn, 2014)

Interestingly enough, just as with voucher programs in the 1980s, charter schools became less of a partisan issue throughout the 1990s as politicians further embraced school choice across the political spectrum. Notable in the expansion of charter school programs and competition amongst public schools was President Obama’s strong and vocal support of many school choice ideologies, such as the previously mentioned Race to the Top program (Berends, 2015; Gilbert, 2019). During President Obama’s presidency, charter school enrollment rose from over 1.8

million students in 2010, to approximately 3 million for the 2015-2016 school year (Kearney, 2017). Despite their increasing popularity, both amongst the American public and through bipartisan support for expansion, recent political events have thrust the issue of school choice back into the focus of political debate. A condensed history of school choice is depicted in table 1.

Table 1

A condensed history of school choice

1955	Milton Friedman writes on school vouchers in <i>Economics and the Public Interest</i>
1960s-1980s	Small, regional voucher programs in cities like San Jose and Boston
1974	Founding of the East Harlem Alternative Schools
1974	Charter Schools originated by Dr. Ray Budde at UMass - Amherst
1980	Milton Friedman publishes <i>Free to choose</i>
1981-1988	Voucher popularity increases during the Reagan administration, but three pushes for national legislation fail
1983	Publication of <i>A Nation at Risk</i>
1988	Minnesota state-wide public voucher program
1988	Milwaukee secular, private voucher program
1991	Eight Charter Schools open in Minnesota
1992	Charters expand to California
1995	Charters expand to 18 more states
1998	1,100 charter schools now open in U.S.
1995	Cleveland religious, private voucher program
1998	Milwaukee religious, private voucher program
2002	Charters codified into national law with NCLB
2004	First and only federally funded voucher program in D.C.
2008	Louisiana voucher program
2011	Start of Indiana voucher program, currently the largest in the U.S.
2015	Charters expand to 43 states and D.C.
2019	29 voucher programs exist in 18 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico

Current State of School Choice

The appointment of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education has thrust the debate over school choice back into the public consciousness. While charter school and voucher program growth has been increasing steadily since the 1980s, President Trump's education agenda has been centered on increasing choice in public education. This push for increased choice also resulted in an increase of arguments against the proliferation of choice schools over traditional public schools (Gilbert, 2019; Zimmerman, 2018). A well-known and unabashed proponent of school choice through her work in Michigan, DeVos pushed school choice in the forms of both religious vouchers and the expansion of charter schools.

DeVos was instrumental in increasing the amount of charter school enrollment to nearly ten percent all attendees of Michigan public schools, with more than 50% of students in Detroit attending charter schools (Gross, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Interestingly enough, the argument around Betsy DeVos centered largely around her wealth, her personal life and work history, and her specific stance on decreased accountability for school choice programs. While many of the questions and discussion pointed to her specific work increasing school choice programs in Michigan, much of the discussion failed to extend to a larger debate on if school choice is a viable option in and of itself (Gross, 2017; Singer, 2017).

Additionally, at the beginning of the Trump presidency, supporters applauded President Trump's push for an expansion of school choice models through his selection of DeVos. Trump additionally made an initial campaign promise to provide \$20 billion dollars of funding for a federal voucher program for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Alcindor, 2017). Trump's plan was more in line with Milton Friedman's (1955; 1980) voucher program, with voucher dollars allowing parents to take allocated funds and enroll their students in any type of

school, whether private, parochial, charter or a traditional public school. While Trump's full plan never came to fruition, his 2019 budget allotted over a billion dollars to charter and voucher programs (Gilbert, 2019).

As of the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, 44 states plus the District of Columbia had 3.2 million students attending over 7,000 charter schools, accounting for 6 percent of all students attending public schools in the United States (David & Hesla, 2018; Kearney, 2017). 17 states and D.C. have at least 100 operating charter schools, and an additional 9 states with at least 50. Of the 44 states and D.C. with charter schools, all but 6 had more students enrolled in 2017 than in the previous year. Charter growth across the nation also increased by roughly 5% from the previous school year (David & Hesla, 2018).

As of the start of 2018, roughly an additional 180,000 students attended private schools paid for by school vouchers across 15 states and D.C. Voucher enrollment has also grown steadily since 2004 when just under 40,000 students attended a private school by participating in a voucher program (EdChoice, 2018). It should be noted, however, that all of these numbers are estimates. These totals are calculated by national school choice organizations that were provided numerous sources from a combination of pro-charter private organizations and state departments of education (David & Hesla, 2018; EdChoice, 2018; Kearney, 2017). One of the more heavily cited critiques in recent years is that the proliferation of charters results in a decrease in educational funding for traditional public schools. Critics also claim that charter school decisions are made not for the benefit of students, but for increased profits for charter management organizations (Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018; Tienken, 2013).

There is also large and continual turnover amongst charter schools. While 309 new charters opened at the start of the 2017-2018 school year, 238 charter schools closed the previous

spring. 14 school districts had more charters close than new charters open, and only 19 of the 44 states plus D.C. avoided any charter closures (David & Hesla, 2018). The effects of voucher programs are somewhat more transparent, with repeated declines in test scores for students using voucher program to leave public schools for private schools (Gilbert, 2019). Despite the complicated and even misrepresented reality of school choice success, from H. W. Bush's presidency through Obama's, school choice has been seen as a bipartisan solution for the supposedly struggling American education system. While recent years have shown a stronger pushback to Trump's lauding of larger voucher programs, many American political leaders on either side of the aisle still point to a necessity for charters (Gilbert, 2019; Logan, 2018; Stitzlein, 2013; Toma & Zimmer, 2011).

Purpose of Study

While much research exists on the effects and efficacy of charter schools and voucher programs, I aimed to investigate the ways in which the overall neo-liberal school choice narrative affects parents in their evaluations of traditional public school and charter school quality. Charter school performance is quite varied within Tennessee, with many earning positive reputations and high Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) ratings; however, nearly half of the state's charters earned a failing score, with failing schools largely located in the greater Memphis area (Tennessee Department of Education, 2015; Zimmer, Henry & Kho, 2017). This has resulted in dual narratives of being locally unpopular in many areas, with residents decrying white outsiders coming into predominantly African American communities and disrupting education, while charter schools simultaneously being politically popular with the state legislature (Diem et al., 2015).

Additionally, this breakdown in narratives extends into research and policy information in that parents' voices are often excluded. Shiller (2011) notes that neoliberal reforms have succeeded despite the "elimination of community input" (p. 171) and along with Campi (2018), both note that parents often have little to no agency during the writing of neoliberal school reforms or the formation of schools of choice. This lack of parent input is present outside of neoliberal discourse as well, with claims that "teachers and the educational establishment have pursued their own self-interest rather than those of pupils and parents" (Peters, 2018, p. 65). With Zimmerman (2018) calling for parent and community input as a vital component to increasing democracy in education, it is vital for parents' voices, their input, and their perceptions on schools, and especially reform-based school choice mechanisms, to be included in the understanding of the expansion of charter schools.

So while there has been some research on community perceptions of school takeovers through the Achievement School District (discussed further in chapter 2) in Tennessee, there is a lack of research on what how parents perceive the quality of charters compared to traditional public schools in the state, as well a general lack of research on if any connections or discrepancies exist between the state and federal level political discourse surrounding school choice and what parents actually believe regarding the two types of schools and school choice in general (Mason & Reckhow, 2017). Given the highly varied, and locally dependent successes of charters throughout Tennessee and the larger discourses surrounding charter schools, this research project aimed to investigate how parents perceive the quality of traditional public schools and charter schools, and how political discourse affects these perceptions of quality.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this project are as follows:

1. How might neoliberal political discourse manifest in the perceptions parents/guardians have of charter schools compared to local neighborhood schools?

This question will be guided by a threefold examination of perceptions on the following types of schools:

2a. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local neighborhood schools?

2b. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local charter school?

2c. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of charter schools in general?

Theoretical Framework

In investigating the notion of neoliberal discourse within school choice, Foucault's (1972) notion of Discourse will play a foundational role. His redefinition of discourse extends beyond communication and semantics, situating discourse as the set(s) of institutionalized knowledge within disciplines and organizations throughout society. Foucault notes that these discourses are more than just symbolic representations of thought, and that in relation to other subjects they help define and situate the original subject of the discourse.

These repeated discourses, working within larger domains, provide the power to institutions and makes said institutions to be seen as inherent or unquestionable, having domain over the individuals they govern. In other words, establishing discipline (Foucault, 1972). Foucault (1977) defined discipline in part by stating, "it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise. It is not a triumphant power...it is a modest, suspicious power, which functions as a calculated, but permanent economy" (p. 170). These hidden disciplines, functions of power in society gained through institutionalized discourses, provides the rules and establishes the authority for society's institutions (Foucault, 1977).

What becomes true or correct (and conversely false or wrong) is what stakeholders in charge within these institutions define as those things. Certain discourses are used to govern, which provides certain individuals with institutionalized power over the subjects under the control of those discourses. This power circulates between those who wield it, which then strengthens the power of the discourse itself, repeating the process, gaining more power and becoming more unquestionable and institutionalized (Foucault, 1972, 1977). As Foucault (1991) put it, these sets of practices and discourses, “crystallize into institutions, they inform individual behavior, they act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things” (p. 81).

As this study aims to look at how the neo-liberal agenda is influencing the perceptions of school quality, Foucault’s concept of Governmentality will also play a large roll in that it can help explain the insistence on destabilizing public education and raising children in educational environments that are institutional embodiments of neo-liberal philosophy (Foucault, 1991). In defining the role and position of the modern government, Foucault arrived at the conclusion that, “with government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of ... employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics - to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved” (p. 95). Viewing the government as employing tactics rather than merely creating and enforcing laws gives a broader view to the effect of government, meaning that government’s institutionalized control is much more complex and widespread than a mere checklist detailing what its population can and cannot do. This is especially significant when considering one of the many contentious arguments in American government and society, the contrary discourses and philosophies of progressivism versus neo-liberalism.

Additionally, given that the expansion of school choice is occurring and strengthening in the current “post-truth” climate, the aforementioned ideas will be coupled with Lakoff’s (2004, 2008) Framing and Conceptual Metaphor theory. This will be used to examine partisan politics and policies through the lens that current political discussion happens with the discourse of the predominant way of thinking. With sufficiently pervasive framing, if facts or logical arguments are presented that disagree or present a counter narrative to the frame (in this case the neoliberal positioning of school choice as superior to public education), those facts and arguments have no bearing and the facts are easily dismissed while the original frame remains (Lakoff, 2004, 2008).

This allows research and evidence that point to the failure and the economic dangers of the school choice movement to be ignored or declared problematic, while also reaffirming the conservative/neoliberal arguments that American public education as a whole is failing, ineffective, and internationally uncompetitive. Additionally, what oftentimes occurs is that counter narratives and facts (whether based in factual reality or not) are presented using the same metaphorical frames as the original, neoliberal/conservative argument, reaffirming and strengthening the hold of those frames, both narratively and cognitively (Lakoff, 2004, 2008).

Lastly, as a significant portion of the population of parents/guardians this study aims to work with has faced systemic bias in navigating educational systems, parental motivation will be looked at through Stovall’s (2013) notion of the Politics of Desperation. Described as historically oppressed groups navigating systems in which they have little to no input in constructing, Stovall (2013) defined this as, “the complex assemblage of thoughts and actions that guide educational decisions in periods of housing and schooling uncertainty, especially when available choices have not been defined by affected communities” (p. 40). While specifically referring to the situation surrounding charter and school choice expansion in

Chicago, Stovall's notion can be applied towards cities affected by the school reform movement across the United States (Stovall, 2013).

This is then a process in which school reformers utilize a history of dissatisfaction with traditional public schools amongst people of color from lower socioeconomic statuses towards new schools and systems, “engendering a sense of desire and belonging” because “*anything* is better than what they have traditionally had at their disposal (Stovall, 2013, p. 40). However, the reality of the situation is that these new choice schools often do not deliver the results promised in meetings used to motivate parents to enroll their children in charter or voucher programs (Stovall, 2013). These four ideas working together are depicting graphically in figure 1.

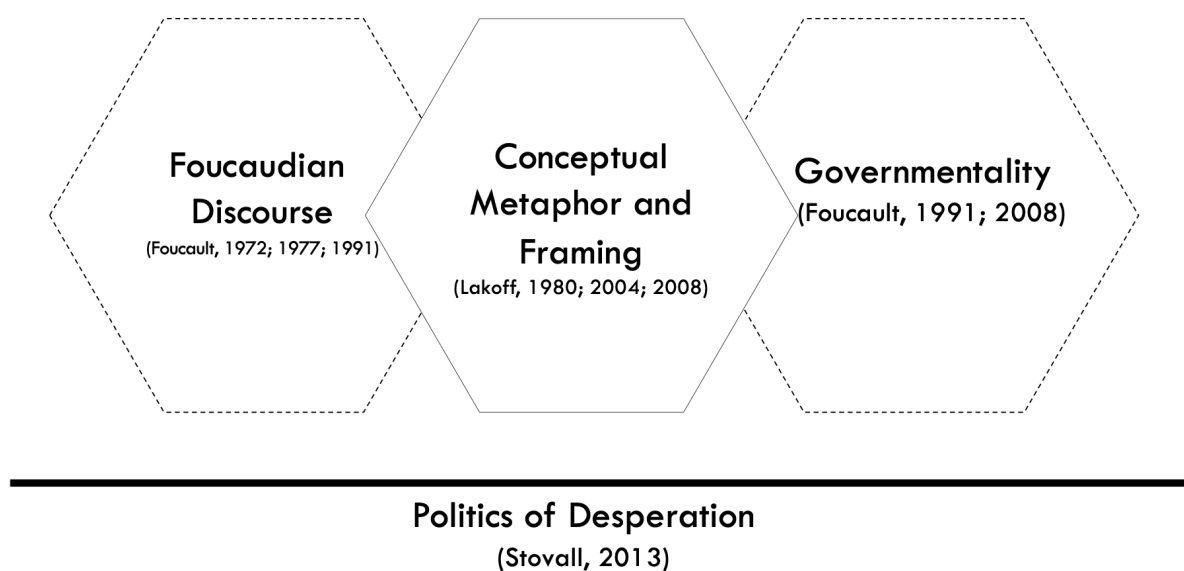


Figure 1: *A graphic representation of the theoretical framework*

Document Organization

This prospectus is organized into three distinct chapters. The first chapter provides the general history of American neoliberal thought and its influence on politics and education, then outlines the history of the school choice movement in the United States and concludes with an introduction to the project and the theoretical framework guiding it. The second chapter provides a review of school choice legislation in Tennessee, some of the major private sector influences on school choice at the national and state level, and a brief review of the metrics used to determine quality of schools in Tennessee. The third chapter details the proposed qualitative case study research methods to address the research questions. In chapter four I present each of my participants' story of navigating school choice in Goldtown, and then the thematically analyzed and organized findings from the interviews with my five participants. In the fifth and final chapter I discuss my findings in three ways, by directly addressing my research questions, by their addition to the established literature, and then in the context of my theoretical framework. Following that I present some of the broader implications of this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

While charter schools exist as a nationwide phenomenon, each state has a unique history regarding their implementation, running and successes/failures. Consequently, discussing and researching charter schools and school choice can be difficult due to the simple reality that charter schools have dramatically different legal requirements and possibilities from state to state. When compared to many other states, Tennessee has been rather conservative with its school choice expansion. Bans on cyber, for-profit and voucher programs are all currently written into law under current legislation (discussed in more detail later on in this chapter), resulting in Tennessee continually earning relatively poor scores by pro-charter organizations.

For instance, the Hunt Institute, a pro-school choice policy think tank, noted Tennessee's school choice legislation as amongst the "weakest nationwide," with only 8 states having stricter school choice laws (Hunt Kean Leadership Fellows, 2015, p. 1). The Center for Education Reform (2018) gave a similarly poor "C" rating to Tennessee's school choice laws. Because of the dramatic differences in charters by state, it is important to note the history and successes of charter schools just within the state of Tennessee, as well as the metrics by which traditional public schools and charter schools alike are deemed successful or not.

It is also important to note that school choice legislation is an ever-evolving field to navigate. This literature review covers the state of school choice in Tennessee up through the spring of 2019 and is comprised of peer-reviewed research, policy reports, and mainstream news publications. Additionally, as detailed later in this chapter, Tennessee legislation currently does not allow for a school voucher program. While an "Individualized Education Account Program" workaround does exist in the state, as it is not legally defined as a voucher program, it is

excluded from my working definition of school choice in Tennessee (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018).

The literature review within chapter 2 discusses the legal history of Tennessee charter school legislation, including notable failures of school choice expansion. This chapter also details the private sector influences on charter school legislation both nationwide and within Tennessee. Finally, this chapter details how schools are assessed in the state and what characteristics parents measure quality schools by.

A History of Tennessee Charter School Legislation

Looking first at the federal parameters placed on the state of Tennessee in defining charter schools, The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, also known as ESSA, (the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965), specifically outlined the federal definition of a public charter school. Sponsored by Senator Lamar Alexander from Tennessee, ESSA stipulates that a public charter must be a public K-12 school that cannot charge tuition, operates under a specific contract with a state and local governing authority and is subject to federal civil rights and title IX laws (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015).

In Tennessee, charter schools were first made legal with the passing of the Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002 (TPCSA). This revision to the Tennessee Code Annotated allowed for the opening of up to 50 charter schools in the Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville metropolitan areas. The TPCSA also established several notable guidelines that pro-school choice groups described as overly strict (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2019). Charter schools in Tennessee cannot deny admission based on any special education designation and charter schools must be approved by the local school district of which they would be part.

Additionally, Tennessee has maintained several strict parameters on the types of charter schools allowed in the state: charter schools cannot be run for profit, religious organizations cannot sponsor a charter school, and virtual or cyber charters are not allowed (Tennessee General Assembly, 2002; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002). Outside of authorization solely through local public school districts, a charter can also be opened if a total of 60% of teachers and parents/guardians of any specific school successfully petitions the local school board to convert an existing public school to be managed by a charter organization (Schaeffing, 2018; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002).

Tennessee also has a general order embedded within its charter school legislation to desegregate charter schools. However, due to the geographic boundary requirements of charter schools within Tennessee and the creation of municipal districts for some Tennessee suburbs, many of the schools remain largely segregated. This is especially true in Memphis. Though federal law notes that charter schools that push for more inclusive settings will receive priority federal funding and any kind of racial discrimination is obviously illegal, critics argue these measures do little to increase racial diversity in charter school settings in any meaningful way (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002; Zimmer, Henry & Kho, 2017).

As charter schools became more popular around the country in the mid-2000s, the fifty charter school cap was increased to ninety in a 2009 amendment to the TPCSA. This 2009 amendment also gave priority enrollment to students attending currently failing public schools and required the state to track the number of students who returned to a traditional public school after attending a charter (Tennessee General Assembly, 2007; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002).

While originally only students geographically assigned to attend low achieving schools were permitted to enroll in a charter, a 2011 amendment to the TPCSA allowed any student to attend any charter school within their district or the newly created Achievement School District, more commonly known as the ASD. This amendment also removed the cap on charter schools and created the Achievement School District - described in further detail below (Tennessee General Assembly, 2011; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002).

The most recent amendment to the law in 2017 most notably provided a victory for local school districts in that they may charge an operating fee of all charter schools within their district to cover administrative and oversight costs. Titled the High Quality Charter Act, this legislation also provided a minimum six million dollars per year fund of public money allocated to charter schools over the next three years for facilities and their maintenance. This act also guaranteed the authorization of charters in Tennessee for the foreseeable future by further enshrining charter school authorization into legislation (Tennessee General Assembly, 2017; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002).

Mentioned above, the ASD is a state-run district comprised only of former traditional public schools that were taken over by the state due to low performance. Within the ASD, schools can be run by a charter management organization (CMO) or the ASD itself and are not tied to specific geographic regions like other districts in Tennessee. Returning to 2011, the first state takeovers were made possible through No Child Left Behind Legislation. Schools taken over by the state in this way were under the direct authority of the ASD or a CMO under the ASD and comprised the lowest achieving five percent of Tennessee schools receiving Title I funding. The ASD was charged with transforming these schools to being within the top twenty-five percent of all Tennessee schools, but since its creation has had very minimal success

(Bulkley & Henig, 2015; Kiel, 2013; Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, 2015; Zimmer, Henry & Kho, 2017).

Notably, when the ASD was founded, over 80% of the targeted failing schools were located in Memphis. More so than other cities in Tennessee, the issues with Memphis public schools stem from its difficulty desegregating the schools across the county. While Shelby County citizens voted to consolidate the county and city school districts in 2010 in an effort to more equitably allocate resources and funding, six suburban cities surrounding Memphis fought this decision. By 2014, the Tennessee legislature successfully passed a bill that allowed those 6 wealthier suburbs to not be part of the county school system. The result, as is common with many areas with heavy charter school presence, is that highly rated, wealthier public schools districts remain isolated from the now underfunded public schools which must compete with schools of choice (Diem, Siegel-Hawley, Frankenberg & Cleary, 2015; Mason & Reckhow, 2017; Zimmer, Henry & Kho, 2017).

Failed Tennessee School Choice Legislation

Although currently illegal under the 2002 Tennessee Public Charter Schools act, several moves have been made to allow for-profit charters run by management organizations rather than the state or local school districts. For-profit charters are run by Education Management Organizations (EMOs) that have been put in charge of managing a charter school or a network of charter schools. Unlike not-for-profit charter organizations, for-profit charters are owned by private citizens, much like any other business. The largest difference between the operation of for-profit and non-profit run charters is the dual role for-profit charter executives have. Not only are they responsible for educating the students who attend their schools and meeting the state requirements for educational growth and accountability, they are responsible for maximizing

profits for their investors. Critics point to the conflicting private and public responsibilities required of for-profit charters as reasons to end the practice of for-profit charter authorization (Mead, 2003; Stitzlein, 2013).

For-profit charter legislation has twice in recent years been put forth by the Tennessee General Assembly. In 2014, bipartisan efforts by Representative DeBerry and Senator Gresham resulted in the creation of House Bill 1693, which would allow nonprofit charter schools to be run by a for-profit EMO. Its sponsors argued that only successful schools would turn a profit for their investors, but critics pointed to the many instances of for-profit charter companies purposefully cutting costs to maximize profits. Regardless of their arguments, the bill failed to receive enough votes to be voted on by the full legislation (Garrison, 2014; Tennessee General Assembly, 2014; Zubrzycki, 2014).

After the failure the year before, Senator Gresham and Representative Casada introduced new legislation to bring for-profit charters to Tennessee in 2015. The bill's proponents argued that for-profit charters would be another way to improve the overall quality of education in Tennessee, but critics again pointed to accusations of for-profit companies putting profits before students. Receiving even less support than the bill put forth the year before, senate bill 692 failed to even be voted on by the education committee (Boucher, 2015; Tennessee General Assembly, 2014).

Tackling school choice from another angle, voucher programs are currently not allowed in the state of Tennessee. While less popular than charter schools, past Republican legislators and governors have been advocating for the state to adopt a voucher program. Voucher programs involve each student receiving a specific amount of taxpayer-funded money, which the student's family could use to send that child to any school - private or public. Proponents argue

that this type of voucher program would cause schools to compete with each other for student enrollment, causing struggling schools to either improve or close (Campi, 2018; Friedman, 1955; 1980; Stitzlein, 2013).

Just within the last five years, Tennessee State Representative Bill Dunn, made a concerted effort along with then-governor Bill Haslam, to pass voucher legislation. The Tennessee Choice and Opportunity Scholarship Act was written to mimic the 2002 Tennessee Charter Act but legalize voucher programs within the state. The bill would allow students from low-income families attending schools in the bottom 5% of to use a set dollar amount to pay for private schooling. Because most of the schools deemed failing were part of the Shelby County School system, however, the bill received backlash for disproportionately affecting students in Memphis.

While initially failing to move through House committees in 2014, the bill was reintroduced in 2015 but met the same fate in a finance committee (Brobeck, 2015). The following year the bill made it through to a vote in the Tennessee House. This version of the bill kept the bottom 5% of failing schools provision and included a gradual increase from 5,000 students its initial year up to a 20,000-student cap by its fourth year. Citing fears that voucher programs would divert taxpayer money away from struggling public schools in Memphis and concern over the limited success of other voucher programs across the country, the bill failed in the House (Gonzales & Boucher, 2016; Sher, 2016; Tennessee General Assembly, 2016).

The most recent failed attempt to initiate a private voucher program in Tennessee, sponsored by Senator Kelsey and Representative Brooks, also failed to leave the committee/subcommittee stage and was not voted on by the full legislature (Aldrich & Kebede, 2017; Tennessee General Assembly, 2018). Picking up where Representative Dunn left off, the

bill lost momentum when accountability measures could not be agreed upon. During this time the publication of several notable studies and achievement reports outlined how students participating in voucher programs actually did worse on growth and achievement measures than their peers attending public schools (Gilbert, 2019).

While Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos advocated for Tennessee lawmakers to pass voucher legislation, parents and teachers in Memphis - the city that would be affected most by a potential voucher program - were worried it would further destabilize schools in Shelby County. It was estimated that roughly \$18 million dollars in state funding would move from the public school system to private schools through vouchers (Aldrich, 2017; Aldrich & Kebede, 2017; Bauman & Aldrich, 2017). Despite its continual failure throughout the last 5 years, newly elected Tennessee governor Bill Lee is asking the legislature to again seek the approval of a law making voucher programs in the state legal (Elbert & Allison, 2018).

The history of both successful and failed Tennessee school choice legislation is depicted below in table 2.

Table 2

Successful and failed Tennessee school choice legislation

2002	Passage of the Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act. Up to 50 charters were authorized to open in Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville metro
2009	TN charter school cap increased to 90, gave priority enrollment to students in failing schools, required charters to report students returning to public schools
2011	Expanded charter enrollment to any student in district, removed charter cap, created the Achievement School District
2014	Failure in TN legislature to legalize for-profit charters and school vouchers
2015	Failure in TN legislature to legalize for-profit charters and school vouchers
2017	Passage of the High Quality Charter Act. Gave charter schools facility funding, and required charters to pay local public school districts administrative costs
2017	Failure in TN legislature to legalize school vouchers
2018	Newly elected TN governor Bill Lee pushed for renewal of voucher legislation efforts

Tennessee Compared to North Carolina

While it was noted in the introduction of this chapter that each state has constructed their own version of school choice based on the state's population and political identity, it is of use to look at other comparative states as a bellwether of sorts. While Tennessee is relatively conservative in its implementation of school choice, there have been the numerous attempts to loosen these restrictions and expand education reform as outlined in the previous section of this chapter. Notably, it is important to recognize that Tennessee's immediate neighbor to the east has much more expansive and lenient school choice legislation. Additionally, much of the proposed expansion for Tennessee's education reform movement looks quite similar to North

Carolina's. As such, it is important to compare the two states to see the possible/probable direction Tennessee's school choice legislation and regulations are headed.

Pointing just to the distinctions between school choice in North Carolina and Tennessee show the wide level of differences in how each state and region has adopted charter school legislation. While Tennessee requires charters operate within a partnership with the public school district in which they will be operating (with the notable exception of the Achievement School District outlined earlier), North Carolina charter schools operate as their own local education agency or LEA (David & Malone, 2009). Similarly, the local district must authorize a charter to open up within a Tennessee School District (or appeal to the state department of education), but a state level association working within the North Carolina Department of Education authorizes new schools. This local versus state level divide exists for charter funding as well.

The authorizing school districts in Tennessee receive funding from charter schools that operate within their districts, but no such authorizer funding exists in North Carolina (Charter School Act of 1996; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2019; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002). Additionally, a 2018 North Carolina law sponsored by North Carolina Representative Bill Brawley allowed for individual towns to create publicly funded charter schools serving only the students from strict geographic boundaries, again dramatically different from the district-level inclusion required in Tennessee. Critics to this North Carolina law point out that this will essentially allow primarily white communities to recreate Jim Crow era levels of segregation by creating small charters which would serve predominantly white communities (Strauss, 2018).

The process for charters to seek exemption from state and district laws is also quite different. In North Carolina charters are automatically exempted from all laws governing public schools except ones dealing with health, safety, first amendment rights, transparent accounting practices and student assessment accountability. Additionally, only 50% of a charter school's teachers need to be licensed, while all charter school teachers in Tennessee must be licensed through the state. Tennessee charters can seek exception from the same laws as charters in North Carolina, but to do so each charter organization must seek individual waivers from the state (Charter School Act of 1996; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2019; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002; Tennessee State School Board, 2018).

North Carolina's charter school systems are also much larger compared to Tennessee's. As of the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, North Carolina's charter school system served more than double the amount of students. Over 104 thousand students attended 174 charter schools in North Carolina, while roughly 43 thousand students attended 112 charter schools in Tennessee. Of note, however, is that while the number of students attending charters in North Carolina grew by 13% when compared to the previous school year, charter school enrollment in Tennessee grew by 23% (David & Hesla, 2018).

Private Sector Influences on Charter Schools and School Choice

With the expansion of the education reform movement since the mid 1980s, K-12 philanthropy has become a multi-billion-dollar endeavor. While critics argue that neither the public nor government have much say in the allocation of these funds, and that this billionaire-class of philanthropists benefits through the form of tax write-offs and for-profit education privatization, these so-called philanthrocapitalists nonetheless have a large effect on public education in America (Baltodano, 2017; Barkan, 2013; Hatch, 2015). Money going to charter

foundations and individual school networks remains a large portion of the money donated to school reform; however, philanthropists have increased the amount on advocacy for education reform from roughly 12% of their donations in 2009 to over 25% by 2014 (Ferrare & Setari, 2017).

The three largest foundations that contribute to K-12 education reform receive much of the attention surrounding education reform and philanthropy. Often called the Big Three, these foundations are the Broad Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Tracking the donations and influences of just these three philanthropic foundations is complicated, however. While some donations are made with broad, public gestures, such as the Walton Foundation's 2018 donation of over \$100 million towards education reform (primarily allocated towards charter school programs), the totality of how much these foundations are donating and to what other organizations requires the scouring of tax documents, foundation reports and any other publicly available documents researchers and journalists can access (Hatch, 2015; Reilly, 2018). A diagram used by permission from *Reclaiming the Teaching Profession* (Hatch, 2015) of these three organizations and many of the neoliberal education organizations that they fund is depicted below in figure 2.

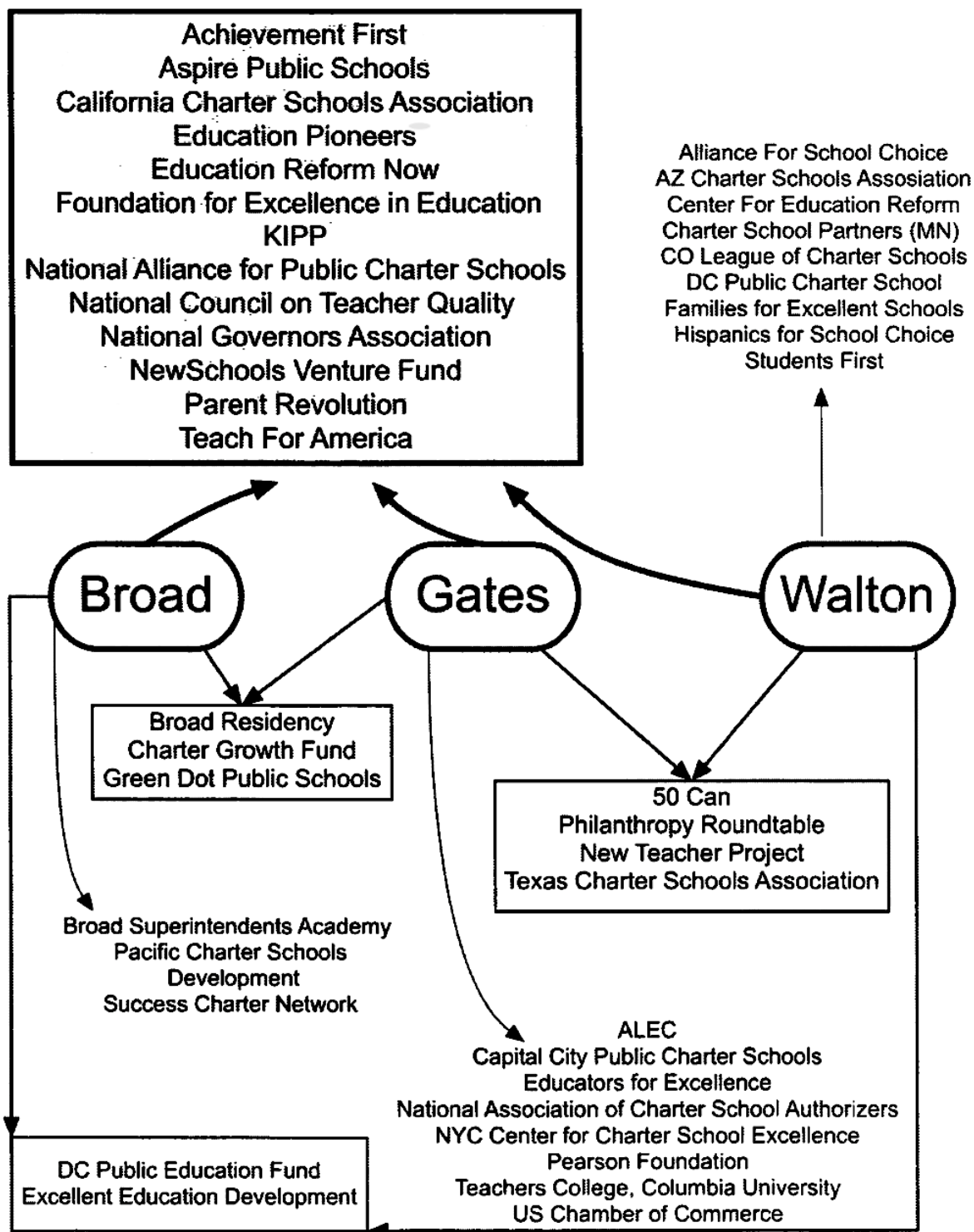


Figure 2: *Broad, Gates, and Walton Family foundation funding connections (Hatch, 2015)*

The Broad Foundation, founded by entrepreneur Eli Broad, focuses extensively on donations to organizations like the KIPP charter network. It is also well known for the Broad Superintendents Academy. Pushing the idea that private-sector business leaders are more capable of running schools, the Broad Academy finances and trains people with corporate experience to take over high profile superintendent and senior executive positions in large school district. The Broad Foundation is also known to donate heavily to political campaigns and education reform lobbyists around the country when school choice legislation comes up for debate in state legislatures (Baltodano, 2017; Hatch, 2015; Heilig, 2018).

Arguably one of the best-known education philanthropy foundations, The Bill and Melinda Gates is also the largest philanthropic foundation in history. While participating heavily in charter foundation and school funding, the Gates Foundation is also known as helping restructure New York City Schools to a public choice model. Like the Broad Foundation, this was accomplished in part by helping to fund the development of the massive KIPP charter network. Additionally, the Gates Foundation has heavily funded education reform think tanks such as the Education Trust and Education Sector. These think tanks focus heavily on messages of public school failure and charter school success (Baltodano, 2017; Hatch, 2015; Kumashiro, 2012).

Similar to the other foundations, the Walton Family Foundation also focuses heavily on school privatization. While donating to well-known organizations like KIPP and Teach For America as the other Big Three foundations do, the Walton Foundation is known especially for funding organizations that focus on pro-charter information campaigns to “persuade parents and the public about the benefits of school choices” (Baltodano, 2017, p. 150). The Walton Foundation currently funds \$144 million in grants to charter organizations across the country, as

well as more than \$30 million in recent years to voucher programs (Baltodano, 2017; Ho, 2018a). The Walton Foundation also funds a wider amount of school choice organizations, having giving money to organizations in at least 26 states since 2009 (Ferrare & Setari, 2018).

It should be noted that the charters organizations running schools themselves are often barred from directly participating in political campaigns. However, the large donor foundations, despite contributing extensively to charter organizations, can give actively to both charter organizations and politicians. Essentially, this results in philanthropic organizations like the Gates and Walton Foundations funding both the politician and the school choice organizations affected by those politicians' legislation (Ho, 2018a).

School choice philanthropy in Tennessee. With much of the school choice activity in Tennessee focusing on Memphis, it is no surprise that the Gates foundation gave \$90 million dollars to go to Memphis area charter school teacher training (Hall, 2017). This organization, which was at one point called Teacher Town, was made to more successfully integrate charter schools and their teachers into the Shelby County School system. It was the hope that teachers from the public schools and charters would unite “around a common set of operating principles, expectations, and evaluations to create a level playing field for each operator to perform optimally,” but instead the two different types of schools focused more on competing with each other for student enrollment (Bauman, 2017). Another one of the pro-charter organizations in Memphis, The Memphis Lift, has received over \$1.5 million in funding from the Walton Foundation in the last three years (Ho, 2018b). While Memphis receives a lot of attention due to the high concentration of charter schools, other, statewide organizations also exist.

The two largest charter organizations in Tennessee receive a combined \$18 million a year in grants from a small number of donors. The Tennessee Charter School Center (also known as

the Tennessee Charter School Incubator) receives nearly \$15 million dollars a year from just 15 funders. The Tennessee Charter School Association (TCSA) receives more than \$3 million dollars combined a year from seven donors (Ho, 2018a). Founded in 1998, the TCSA was one of the first pro-charter school organizations in the state. Its website notes that it was created exclusively to “focus efforts and resources on creating a local and statewide policy environment” for charter schools and was key in passing the first charter school legislation in the state. The Tennessee Charter School Incubator (TCSI) was founded years later in 2009 and notes it was modeled after charter centers in New York City and New Orleans. While the TCSA focuses more on state and local policy, the TCSI focuses on developing and opening charter schools and training charter school teachers throughout Tennessee (Tennessee Charter School Center, 2019).

School Accountability Metrics in Tennessee

In order to determine overall school quality, including which schools are required by legislation to be taken over and run as a charter, the state of Tennessee uses a series of standardized tests, called TNReady to assess student achievement and compare students’ growth. According to the Tennessee Department of Education (2017), the TNReady tests are state level assessments that

- provide feedback about students' academic progress and how it aligns with grade-level expectations, providing parents and teachers a big-picture perspective about how a student is progressing compared to peers across the district and state, including a student's strengths and growth opportunities;
- build confidence and transparency about students' readiness for college and the workforce among Tennessee universities and employers and holds us accountable to serving all students fairly;

- help educators strengthen instruction and reflect on their practice, and allow us to highlight schools where students are excelling, so we can learn from those who are doing well; and
- help inform decisions at the state level and help state and district leaders determine how to allocate resources, better invest in schools, and identify where we may need to offer additional support.

While this falls directly in line with the way standardized tests are conceptualized and utilized throughout the American educational system, there has been considerable pushback to our reliance on testing.

First, educational researchers for some time have resisted the notion that standardized tests as they are currently employed are an accurate depiction of student ability, student growth, or teacher quality (Hatch, 2015; Ravitch, 2016). Using the language directly from the Tennessee Department of Education (2018) provided above, tests are used to “provid[e] parents and teachers a big-picture perspective about how a student is progressing compared to peers across the district and state” as well as to “allow [them] to highlight schools where students are excelling.” Inherently then, these tests are a way for students, parents, teachers, the state, and the general public to all gauge the supposed quality of teachers and schools and identify which schools are supposedly failing, in addition to those schools scoring well.

This creates a unique scenario concerning free-market based considerations for closing or reforming traditional public schools and the supposed need for creating schools of choice. However, while these scores may seem like a straightforward and objective way to determine school quality, it is far less simple. Tests are not standardized across states, states choose different metrics with which to base the “quality” of schools on, and critics claim that

standardized tests fail to account for the variations and inequities in students' backgrounds like culture, race, and socio-economic status (Hatch, 2015; Ravitch, 2016; Renee & Trujillo, 2014). To further complicate this, depending on the institution completing the study, the exact metrics used, and the interpretation of the results, the data can support the success of choice schools, or a lack for their necessity.

Because standardized testing scores are seen as the best and most objective determiner of school quality, charter schools became "more driven by high-stakes testing than the public schools" (Ravitch, 2016, p. 152). So even though standardized testing is seen as problematic and inadequate to actually determine student, teacher and school performance, as well as whether or not traditional public schools or choice schools perform better, they are the tools which are used to both prove the successes of public schools and of competing charter schools. Because of this, they are the way that researchers and school choice critics hold schools accountable (Hatch, 2015; Kuhn, 2014; Ravitch, 2016; Renee & Trujillo, 2014).

Tennessee's growth model, the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), is a proprietary statistical model that uses the TNReady scores to measure student growth. The Tennessee Department of Education notes that the TVAAS growth model should be used alongside TNReady scores to show teacher and school performance. While it was noted earlier in this chapter that critics of standardized testing argue these models do not take individual student backgrounds into account, the Tennessee Department of Education claims that the TVAAS model successfully controls for individual student demographic and economic backgrounds (EVAAS, 2015). Additionally, many researchers argue that value-added measures such as TVAAS are not as reliable as they claim, and should not be used to determine effectiveness and guide large-scale policy decisions, as there are simply too many potential

unknown factors for a process that appears simple and objective (Baker & Xu, 1995; Kupermintz, Shepard & Linn, 2001; Yeh, 2012).

Parental Perceptions of School Quality

While the legal construction of schools of choice and their perceived quality according to traditional academic or state-mandated metrics is one aspect of understanding the quality of schools, the larger effects on what parents perceive as school quality is another aspect entirely. Key to this is how parents construct their definitions of school quality and what other factors are important to these definitions, whether it be traditional public schools or schools of choice. As with the understanding and evaluation of choice schools, these definitions and perceptions cannot be discussed in a singular manner due to the complex nature of American education. When this is coupled with the varying demographic considerations of parents, students, and the neighborhoods in which these schools reside, we are left with some research detailing broad understandings of parental perceptions of quality, but other research noting much finer, nuanced descriptions as well.

Traditional perceptions of school quality. When looking at the very broad understandings of what parents classify as a “good” school, researchers note a fairly stable set of criteria that parents value: a community’s perception of a school, traditional notions of geographic location, academic performance data (such as test scores and graduation rates), and issues of safety and discipline (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016; Beabout & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). In evaluating teacher quality, parents reference the schools’ academic performance data as an indication of individual teacher performance, in contrast to evaluations of quality based on more personal interactions (like feeling as if teachers

care, are fair, and are helpful with individual problems) like students do (Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

However, the most widespread, academic understanding of how parents consider and evaluate schools against these criteria is one devoid of reflexivity and emotion and is made largely on large-scale data analyses of survey results (Cooper, 2005; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Schneider and Buckley (2002) noted that, “relying simply on survey data to find out how parents will exercise their expanding rights to choose can lead to an overly optimistic view of what will motivate their actual choice” (p. 142). While these more traditional conceptions of the most important criteria for parents when evaluating schools and teachers have been considered as fairly static and universal over the past few decades, more contemporary, smaller-scale, qualitative studies of parents from more specific demographic criteria give different results.

Context dependent criteria. In contrast to those traditional and supposedly static criteria, researchers’ more recent work contends that these selection criteria and expectations are much more nuanced, emotional, and specific based on demographic information and location. Additionally, research points to parents identifying themselves through their choices of the schools their children attend, and not forming a decision solely on what they deem is best for their children (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). This phenomenon was noted in studies looking at middle and upper class, predominantly white parents who look at school-choice as an extension of their own political ideologies. These parents tended to regard their identity as it is informed by education in two primary ways: reinforcing the importance of diversity and valuing the idea of public education as a force for the Deweyan concept of social good (Altenhofen, Berends & White, 2016; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013).

This particular demographic of parents not only looks at these larger ideological considerations as important to their own identity, but also important as an environment they want their children to be raised in. However, while this particular parental group claims this as being vital to their identity as progressive Americans and crucial for their children, these more demographically and economically diverse school settings are not often the same ones that share the previously defined characteristics of “good” schools. In most cases, this results in parents choosing whatever option results in their children attending the most selective, academically rigorous, and designated as being traditionally high performing schools, which are composed of predominantly white and affluent children and values. Consequently, while choice schools and many parents point to school choice as a free market solution to increase diversity, the schools remain quite segregated (Altenhofen, Berends & White, 2016; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

While minority and economically marginalized parents often share the same general perceptions towards the traditional conceptions of schools, their considerations are specific, nuanced and context-dependent as well. With school choice giving students the possibility of attending schools outside of their neighborhood, conceptions of space have become important considerations in choosing schools. This was previously interpreted as only consisting of geographic location, such as how long bus rides last and whether or not they perceive the neighborhood as being safe (Beabout & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Cooper, 2005). When this conception of space is opened up to include a more place-oriented understanding, location takes on a much more personal and nuanced realities, including such considerations as a person’s ties to the community the school is in, the aesthetic qualities of the school space, personal opinions

on the people surrounding and entering school buildings, and how a student will fit into this space (Bell, 2007).

Economically marginalized parents tend to also more highly value their considerations on how strict they perceive the discipline at potential schools. This sense of discipline is linked directly to conceptions of character building for their children (Beabout, & Cambre, 2013; Cooper, 2005). This has a tendency for parents from economically marginalized families to more highly value the religious aspects of parochial schools made available through voucher programs, even if the school does not directly match their own religious and sectarian preferences (Bell, 2007). These feelings are also bound up in deep-seated and long-standing negative opinions towards public schools and teachers based on past failures to democratize education (Beabout, & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Cooper, 2005; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). Parents can see these settings as unsafe, ineffective, and uncaring for their students (Bell, 2007; Cooper, 2005).

These negative perceptions of teachers can especially be looked at in this way, being seen as untrained and incapable of teaching children in these contexts, as well as displaying racial biases towards Black and Brown students (Beabout, & Cambre, 2013; Cooper, 2005). These opinions lead parents from disenfranchised populations to not only actively participate in school choice programs but to seek out any other possible alternatives to the public schools that are seen as problematic. However, parents from these disenfranchised populations often lack the same levels of access to a variety of schools as their more affluent, white counterparts (Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

Equity of resources and information access. As outlined in chapter one, proponents of school choice systems herald this movement as an opportunity for schools to compete in order to

improve the overall performance and access to quality schools, but this unfortunately is often not the case (Cooper, 2005; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). This type of market ideology for school choice is dependent on parents being able to make choices that adhere directly along the limited considerations of the designers of the school choice systems, which again is not often the case for non-white, less-affluent parents. Cooper (2005) explicitly stated that “underprivileged parents are destined to face defeat in a competitive educational marketplace given their limited socioeconomic resources” (p. 175). Parents from racially disenfranchised and economically marginalized situations simply do not have access to the same information in order to make these decisions. Information about school options and requirements are often only available online and only in English, excluding the many students and parents who do not have access to these resources or who require these materials in their home language (Cooper, 2005; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

White, affluent families not only tend to have better access to this information, but they also are more likely to have the resources and social networks to attend more schools of their choosing. These families often have access to social resources for highly-sought after references, are able to transport students to schools regardless of distance, as well as having the education, experience, and social capital to work the system in their favor (Bourdieu, 1968; Roda & Wells, 2013; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Schools that are perceived as being of higher quality and more exclusive are also often in neighborhoods and influenced by systems and structures that exclude racial minorities to not dissuade white, advantaged parents from keeping their children out of these settings, which only further increases racial segregation in these schools (Bell, 2007; Roda & Wells, 2013).

Minority and economically marginalized students often have fewer resources available to them and their parents in making decisions on which schools to submit applications. With fewer resources available to them, economically marginalized students and parents are less able to meet the numerous requirements and application deadlines to attend the so-called better performing schools. While proponents of school choice systems argue they disrupt the status quo, oftentimes little progress is made. Ultimately, what winds up happening is that more affluent, white students attend the same kind of highly regarded and high-performing schools they were already attending, while their minority and economically marginalized counterparts attend the same lower-performing and racially segregated schools they were already attending (Cooper, 2005; Roda & Wells, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

In order for the school choice system and ideology to work, not only must parents and guardians adhere to strict conceptions of market-based theories, but schools must also fight for specific segments of the population, which are often based on niche market considerations (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). Although not a traditional form of advertising, publicly available report cards on testing data and other metrics of school performance are often reduced to overly simplistic yet easily digestible figures and statistics that greatly appeal to white, affluent parents. This results in these parents pushing their children, who statistically perform better on standardized tests, into schools already regarded as high-performing for doing well on those same tests. This creates a loop where higher performing schools seem better and better, while lower-performing schools that serve marginalized students are seen as doing worse and worse, exacerbating the problem of racial segregation in schools (Roda & Wells, 2013; Schneider & Buckley, 2002).

Summary

While charter school growth has continually increased in Tennessee since the 2002 legislation making them legal, the level of their success has been complicated. And while unsuccessful, legislators on both sides of the political aisle have attempted to increase the scope of school choice options in Tennessee. Legislators have argued the need for virtual charter schools, for-profit charter management organizations, voucher programs, and varying degrees of accountability standards, mimicking the school choice model of North Carolina.

One of the key decision-making factors behind the legislative argument for increased school choice options are the complicated and controversial usage of standardized testing and value-added models, such as Tennessee's TVAAS system. While proponents claim that the tests and growth models objectively measure student growth and teacher/school quality, critics argue otherwise. However, with so much weight and attention being given to these scores by legislators and parents alike, they have become immensely important to gauge the purported quality of both charter schools and traditional public schools alike.

Lastly, parents' views of school quality as a determining factor to choose a choice school or leave a traditional public school are equally complicated. While much of the research focuses on metrics like test scores, location, and school safety, more nuanced research shows that the parents' own demographics affect what they look for in a school, focusing on everything from discipline philosophies that match the parents', student population diversity, and teacher diversity. However, while choice models claim to democratize the options available to all students, the information and systems through which parents can enroll in schools of choice still oftentimes favor more affluent, white families.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Overview

In this chapter I outline the design of the research project, justifications for my case study approach, and how the research questions were addressed using a qualitative embedded single case study research design. To assess parental perceptions of school quality and the possible political effects on these perceptions, the researcher interviewed middle class, white parents about their agreement with popular neoliberal opinions on public education along with their perceptions of their local, traditional public school in comparison to a Tennessee charter school, and charter schools in general. As stated in chapter 1, the research questions investigated in this study are as follows:

1. How might neoliberal political discourse manifest itself in the perceptions parents/guardians have of charter schools compared to local neighborhood schools?
- 2a. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local neighborhood schools?
- 2b. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local charter school?
- 2c. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of charter schools in general?

Research Design

An instrumental single case study design guided this study examining the potential effect of neoliberal political rhetoric on middle class, white parents' perceptions of school quality. Gerring (2004) argued, "that for methodological purposes a case study is best defined as an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar's aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena" (p. 341). The bounded phenomenon,

which will be described in more depth later in this chapter, is the potential effect of neoliberal rhetoric on perceptions of school quality.

In defining the particular and complex boundaries of case study research, Stake (2000) noted that the “nature of the case,” its history, physicality, economic and political contexts, previous case research and the individuals involved all work to define the particulars of what makes the case a case (p. 447). While this particular qualitative case study relied exclusively on participant interviews as the data source for analysis, extensive contextual information and previous research have been analyzed and incorporated into its design. Figure 3 denotes the overall design of the study and the contextual information mentioned will be further expanded upon later in this chapter when discussing the particularities of this case.

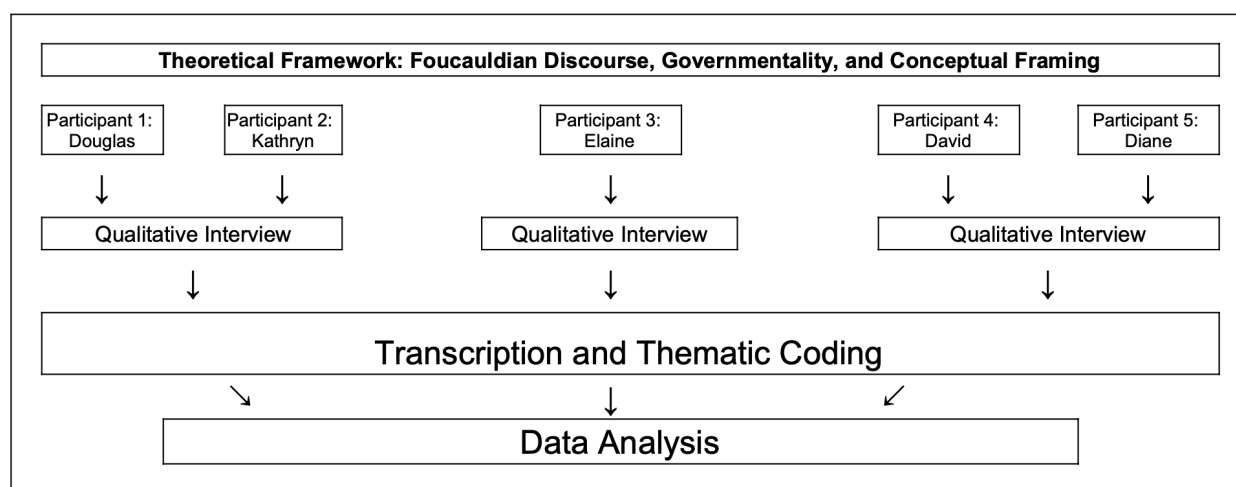


Figure 3: *Case Study Processes of Data Collection and Analysis*

Case Study Rationale

While Schwandt and Gates (2018) pointed out, “there is no single understanding of ‘case study’” and that there is considerable variability across fields regarding methodological definitions, apart from noting the above-mentioned focus on a particularly defined case, “it is a fool’s errand to pursue what is (or should be) truly called ‘case study’” (pp. 343-344). Case study can be understood as a methodology, a series of methods comprising quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches, involving singular or multiple data sources, and spanning epistemological perspectives (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Gerring, 2004; Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Stake, 2011). As such, this methodological defense of my choice for case study research will not focus on an intricate methodological defense of multiple scholars’ stances on what specific methods might or might not constitute case study research, but rather look at several commonalities between broader understandings of case study research and general qualitative methods focusing on interviewing the lived experiences of individuals experiencing the bounded phenomenon outlined as the case (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Consequently, this section of the chapter will establish a general definition of case study as a methodology, then define specifically what kind of case study this particular project is.

Assuming as broad a definition as possible, Yin (2009) posited that a case study is “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. a ‘case’), set within its real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). This particular case is focused on the potential effects neoliberal political discourse regarding education might have on parental beliefs regarding school quality between charter schools and traditional public schools in a particular community in Eastern Tennessee.

Consequently, a single, embedded case study design was selected, with the phenomenon serving as the singular case (Yin, 2012).

Yin (2012) described an embedded case study as having multiple units of analysis serving as the data comprising a singular case. As the phenomenon in question (the case) is exclusively focused on the perceptions in this region regarding educational quality between the different subsets of schools, the units of analysis will be parents or sets of parents who reside the geographic boundaries of the case, and are subject to neoliberal discourse regarding education (Thomas, 2016; Yin, 2012). While case studies often benefit from multiple sources of data (Yin, 2012), the specific focus of the research questions and the phenomenon in question did not suit itself to artifact or observational data, which are commonly utilized.

Additionally, this single case embedded case study is also classified as a descriptive, instrumental case study in describing the potential effects of this phenomenon. Descriptive case studies “offer rich and revealing insights into the social world of a particular case” (Yin, 2012, p. 49). Schwandt and Gates (2018) noted that descriptive case studies are often utilized to “give voice to people who are marginalized, disadvantaged, excluded, or vulnerable” (p. 346). Referring back to the two previous chapters of this dissertation, parents’ voices have historically been excluded from the neoliberal processes and policies of school reform, and this study in part aims to add their voices to this potential issue (Bell, 2007; Campi, 2018; Peters, 2018; Roda & Wells, 2013; Shiller, 2011; Stovall’s, 2013).

Additionally, as this particular case is relatively unexplored, especially in the geographic context in which it is set, a case study “may be useful in the preliminary stages of investigation” ... which can later be “tested systematically with a larger number of cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301). So, although this study is not meant to make large scale claims about the potential effects

of neoliberal discourse as a whole, an instrumental case study can “provide insight into an issue,” allowing for additional research in the future (Stake, 2000, p. 445). Along these same lines, instrumental case studies are completed with distinct purposes in mind (Thomas, 2016). Stake (2000) expanded on this, noting that “the case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates the understanding of something else” (p. 445). For this study, this distinct purpose, which the case provides insight into, is how middle class, white parents were affected by neoliberal political rhetoric when assessing the quality of charter versus traditional public schools.

The Case

Despite the case itself serving as a means to approach an analysis of this phenomenon, defining the case is still paramount to create “boundedness” for the study (Stake, 2000; Thomas, 2016). While the case is the phenomenon itself, the boundedness establishes the criteria of inclusion or context in which the case and consequently study take place (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yazan, 2015). For this study, the case is the phenomenon of potential effect of neoliberal education rhetoric on white, middle-class parents’ perceptions of school quality. Bounding this, however, are the geographic and temporal conditions in which it occurred. Participants all lived in a specifically defined subset of an East Tennessee metro area. These particular areas of the city are designated as being part of specific public schools targeted for recruitment by the charter school within the district.

Additionally, as the study aims to describe the potential effects of neoliberal discourse on this subset of parents, only those adults who have school age children living in these neighborhoods during the time of the study are part of the case. As this study treated each parent or set of parents as a unit of analysis through which to represent the case, each interview

participant is an embedded unit of analysis existing within the larger case (Yin, 2012). This case also existed in the larger context outlined in chapters 1 and 2, affected by the history of charter school legislation, the overall neoliberal influences on the American education system as a whole, previous literature on parental perceptions of school quality, and the metrics through which the state of Tennessee measures school accountability.

Moving from the outside in, Figure 4 depicts the case and the aforementioned contexts. Within the case exist each embedded unit of analysis (participant interviews), and the parental perceptions of education in the U.S. and of school quality (of local public schools, the local charter school, and charter schools in general) through which the case was analyzed.

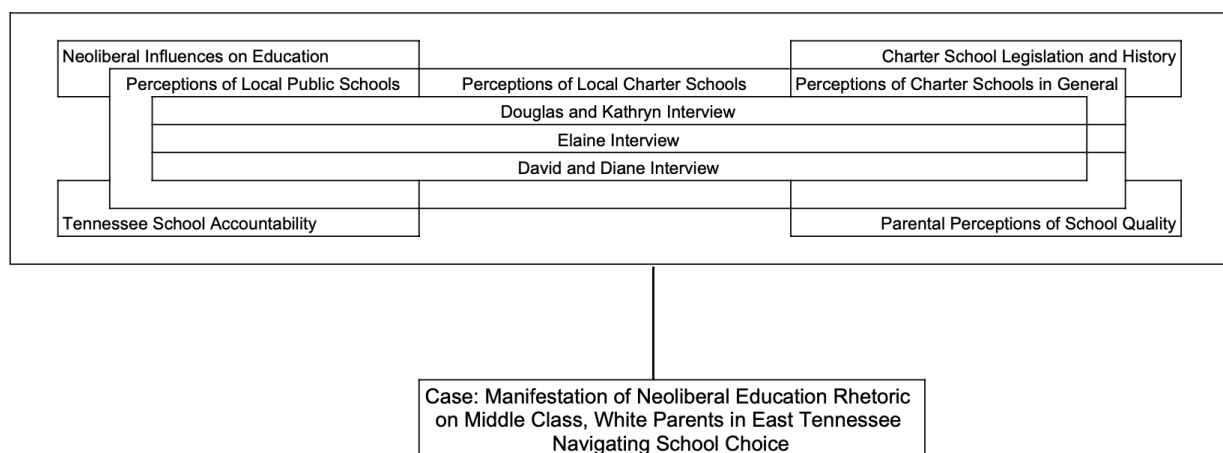


Figure 4: *Graphic representation of the case, context, and units of analysis*

Sampling

Due to the study boundaries previously identified, this study utilized a non-probabilistic, purposive method of sampling. A purposive sample is the targeting of “participants who have experienced the central phenomenon or key concept being explored” (Creswell & Clark, 2018, p. 176), in this case parents of school aged children within the geographic school zones targeted by Crystal Charter school for recruitment. More specifically, this study used network sampling and snowball sampling, also known as chain sampling. Network sampling involves using previously existing personal connections of the researcher to recruit participants. Snowball or chain sampling allows for previously identified, purposively selected participants to identify others that also provide rich information for future interviews and suggest their recruitment for the study (Patton, 2015).

Concerning the determination of a sufficient quantity of interviews and participants necessary to support this case study, Yin (2012) noted that this issue is hotly debated within the field of case study research. Yin asserted that this is based on the researcher’s judgment and that there is no simple formula for determining necessary sample size in qualitative case study research. Patton (2003), flat out stated that “there are no rules for sample size” (p. 244). Instead, Yin left researchers with a generic, but useful statement – “the more cases ... the greater confidence or certainty in a study’s findings; and the fewer the cases ... the less confidence” (Yin, 2012, p. 9). This is further compounded by the balance of width and depth (Flick, 2014; Patton, 2003).

Although interviewing dozens of participants might have provided an incredibly wide base of experience from which to garner information about this case, restrictions of time and resources would have prevented that number of interviews from being analyzed in sufficient

depth. While by no means definitive or universally agreed upon in the field, Creswell (2003) noted that sample sizes of three to five participants are sufficient for qualitative case study research designs. Despite being a small sample size relative to larger mixed-methods or quantitative projects, this will allow a great deal of depth in analysis to explore how this particular phenomenon might affect perceptions of school quality, rather than attempting to make a generalizable statement about this population as a whole from a large sample size (Patton, 2003; Thomas, 2016; Yin, 2012).

Participants

This study focused on a particular geographically bound subset of Gold County School families who have been previously identified by the singular charter school in Goldtown, Crystal Charter, as the population most likely to apply to their program. These specific areas were defined in a previously published, in-house research report that is purposefully not cited to retain pseudonymity of Crystal Charter. All participants were parents of students, living in or attending schools in nine particular zip codes of Goldtown.

Participant recruitment and data collection. In accordance with the purposive network or snowball/chain sampling method described earlier in this chapter (Patton, 2002), participants who represented the case were recruited through third party contacts familiar with participants. Contact with all participants was made through three different networking situations of the researcher. The five participants, their children, the schools associated with the families and their methods of school choice are depicted in table 3, shown below.

Table 3

Participant Details

Participant	School-aged children	Zoned Public School	School(s) Attended	Method of School Choice
Douglas and Kathryn	Campbell and Lee	Holly Elementary	Crystal Charter, Belle Valley	Charter and Public Transfer
Elaine	Veronica	Mountain View	Mountain View	Relocation
David and Diane	James	Adena Elementary	Private Montessori, Goldtown Elementary	Private and Public Transfer

Once participants were identified, contact was made via email to schedule interviews. The same recruitment email was sent to all participants (Appendix B). The purpose of the study, as well as a maximum time commitment of one hour for the initial interview was clarified in the email. Additionally, participants were given the option of completing the interview by phone, video chat, or at a local setting of their choosing. All participants for this study were interviewed in person at locations around Goldtown.

Once contact was made with each participant, a time and interview location were mutually agreed upon based on the participant's suggestion. Prior to beginning the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent letter (Appendix C). In order to elicit thoughtful and specific responses on the parent's perceptions of school quality, a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) was designed allowing follow-up with improvised, probing questions when necessary and appropriate (Flick, 2014; Roulston, 2010). This semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide and structure the interview.

Although it was not the intent at the beginning of this project to only interview white, middle-class participants, through the network and snowball sampling completed by the researcher this turned out to be the case. Many potential participants outside of this particularly narrow set of demographics were contacted and invited to join the study, but all declined or did not respond to email requests to participate. As such, with this commonality, the case was further refined after the completion of data collection to only include this particular set of parents in Goldtown, allowing for more specific analysis to occur (Stake, 1995). To further elaborate on this, each of my five participants were recruited through networking, via already existing relationships providing a means for initial contact. Many other individuals were contacted, including those outside of the refined demographics of the case, but each declined to participate. For instance, contact was made via email to parents with children attending Crystal Charter and to parents that are members or heads of Goldtown parent teacher organizations, but all declined to participate. Several of the participants also passed along the recruitment letter to other parents, but no contact was made via these channels.

Qualitative interviewing

Although more quantitative survey results might be seen as more trustworthy and representative of the overall reality of the parents' motivation, qualitative researchers and their methods complicate and resist that objectivist view. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) noted that "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" and that it "make[s] the world visible" (p. 10). This is accomplished through the way that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings" in an attempt "to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 10). By using the participants'

actual words I aimed to interpret to their thoughts and larger system of beliefs with potential neoliberal influences that affected their perceptions of school quality.

Even though interviews allow for insight into participants' worldviews, interviews are not without their limits. The participants' responses were still limited to what they were able to and willing to share with the researcher, an individual they often have little rapport with (Prosser, 2013). Additionally, due to the hyper individual level of perspective gained through qualitative inquiry, the results are personal and thus not generalizable towards a larger population (Flick, 2014). Participants were given the option to be interviewed individually or with their partner. Two of the interviews were conducted as groups, with each half of a married couple participating. While the individual interview obviously privileged Elaine's recollection of events and her perceptions, the group interviews of Douglas and Kathryn, as well as David and Diane provided a level of comfort in being interviewed together, and allowed the participants to play off of each other, prompting their partner to remember other events, providing additional context, and supporting their recollection of what happened and why (Flick, 2014; Patton, 2002).

Semi-structured interview protocol design. When considering where this study fits into previous research on the subject, large-scale generalizable parent-focused surveys exist and have been employed on a national level. Namely, in 1996, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2012, and 2016 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) employed the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey. Some of the questions deal with parental perceptions of quality dealing with their child's school and the services they offer, but go beyond looking at perceptions of education quality into much more specific information about specific students and their needs (U.S Census Bureau, 2016).

There is also the 2016 Education Next Survey, nationally administered to the general public, which contains sections about the public's perception of charter schools as well as their thoughts about the traditional public schools in their community. Although some questions immediately address issues approaching neoliberal political influences, many questions go beyond the scope of school choice options in Gold County and in Tennessee, as well as having complicated stems as well as response scales (Education Next, 2016). Using these previous pieces of research along with the articles examined during the literature review, I developed the interview protocol using neutrally framed commonplace neoliberal discourse surrounding public education. In conjunction with this, the previously mentioned NCES parent-focused survey and the Education Next school choice survey were consulted and used as a general template for questions on perceptions of the schools their child attend, attended or could attend, but opened up to reduce any potentially leading questions and to maximize the opportunity for parents to share their perceptions on school quality and beliefs on education.

Data Analysis

In order to preserve the Discourses used by the participants, in vivo coding was the first coding method employed. Saldaña (2016) described in vivo coding as being valuable to “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106), which is vital when looking at how the parents constructed justifications as to their perceptions on the quality of different school types and how political rhetoric affected their thinking. When utilizing in vivo coding, I paid attention to and identified passages and words that stood out as having particular resonance and relevance to what was discussed by the participants in the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). These codes, the

associated passages from the interview transcript, and the participant's pseudonym was then entered into a spreadsheet to organize the data and codes. After the interview transcripts were read through and in-vivo coded once, I reread the transcripts and checked the selected codes for thoroughness.

Following the initial in vivo coding, a second method of first cycle coding was employed to further investigate the beliefs regarding neoliberalism and school choice within the participant's responses. Value coding was utilized for this cycle as they, "reflect a participant's values, attitudes and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131). The transcripts were read through again, this time identifying the values regarding education, school, and neoliberalism put forth by the participants. Once these value codes were identified, they were entered into the aforementioned spreadsheet with the same identifying information so the value coded quote could be identified by interview participant.

I then thematized the data and constructed them into motivations regarding school enrollment, school perceptions and potential neoliberal beliefs. This provided me with a smaller, more concise and connected list of codes to make the identified codes more manageable (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017; Saldaña, 2016). As such, focused coding was used to identify larger categories into which the values and focused coding could fit into before moving to thematizing. During this process, the previous cycles of codes was read through, organized, reorganized, and compared in order to collapse the identified codes down into common, more recurrent and more powerful codes utilized to address the research questions (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The specific interview questions used to address each research question is depicted below in Table 4. These final codes, along with salient examples from the interview

responses, and their relevance to each research question was organized into a codebook (Appendix E).

Table 4

Interview Question Alignment with Research Question

Research Question	Interview Question
1. How might neoliberal political discourse affect the perceptions parents/guardians have of charter schools compared to local neighborhood schools?	1,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,18,19,20
2a. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local neighborhood schools?	1,2,3,4,5
2b. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local charter school?	1,2,3,4,5
2c. What perceptions do parents/guardians have of charter schools in general?	1,8,9,10,11,12

Validity and Reliability

Concerning qualitative research, Creswell and Miller (2000) defined validity as “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomenon and is credible them” (p. 124). As the primary unit of analysis and source of data stems from participant interviews, data triangulation was utilized. In this case, analyzing the themes present in multiple interviews across all of the participants together helped ensure that a richer, deeper, and fuller understanding of the phenomenon in question was depicted, rather than relying exclusively on a single perspective (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Thomas, 2016; Yin, 2012).

Additionally, this process of data triangulation will be supplemented by looking for disconfirming or negative evidence (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the process of thematic analysis, I looked for existing conflicting themes and codes to ward against only examining evidence that confirmed simpler or expected answers to my research questions. To further this process, I continually reflected on my own assumptions and biases throughout the process of data collection and analysis to bracket my personal influences on the project. Included in this is a reflexivity statement located at the end of this chapter that helped me remain cognizant of my own positionality within this complex issue.

Commonly found within qualitative research, I also performed member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure my accounting of participants’ words are accurate. After transcribing participant interviews, I sent a transcribed electronic copy of their interview for participants to review for accuracy before beginning analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also described the process of the researcher keeping an audit trail. This audit trail was a self-kept record of all methodological decisions and research activities that took

place throughout the entirety of the project. This ensured that the study remained systematically grounded in established and credible methods (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Lastly, and instrumental to case study research, was the inclusion of “thick description” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1989). Creswell and Miller (2002) noted that providing robust, detailed descriptions of the participants, settings, and their words create credibility by creating a “narrative account” that allows readers to experience as much of the situation being described as possible (p. 129). By going beyond just reporting briefly described facts or minimal depictions of my participants, their lives and their words, I provide my readers with enough details to see for themselves that my accounting is credible.

Reflexivity Statement

Although I do not personally agree with the privatization of education, I have worked to frame this study in such a way as to not lead participants to confirm my own biases, nor to tackle the political issue itself. I also have a complicated history with the issue as I previously taught in a school of choice, but found myself disagreeing with the way they employed school choice rhetoric and advertised to parents. Going beyond my own personal experiences, the history of school privatization as presented in the earlier chapters of this dissertation is rife with conflict between those that agree and disagree with schools of choice. In short, the history of the issue is complicated at best. Outside of my connections to the overall issue of neoliberal education rhetoric and school choice, I also live in the community from which I drew my participants and framed my case, and work with teacher interns in some of these same schools. While this helped provide me with somewhat of an insider’s perspective on the situation, I needed to also guarantee that not too much of myself and my own biases clouded my analysis.

By following the above-mentioned procedures to maintain credibility and focusing on participant interviews and their own perceptions, as well as asking neutrally framed questions, I aimed to distance myself from situating all of my analysis on the merits and/or dangers of charter school legislation. Additionally, by focusing on the political rhetoric of what is being said and how my participants might have adopted these positions in their own evaluations of schools, I attempted to remove my focus away from my own evaluations of the veracity of this rhetoric. To provide additional safeguards against the intrusion of my own biases, I kept reflexive memos throughout the entire research process to help bracket myself off and allow for my analysis to stay focused on my research questions with as little interference from my own personal thoughts as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2009; Nowell et al, 2017).

Limitations

Due to the necessary convenience sampling required due to the wide and diverse population of parents targeted for interviews, their responses do not fully reflect the thoughts and feelings of the entire parent population and thus reducing generalizability towards the entire population and case. This is also true simply by employing a qualitative case study design. Similarly, while this study provides information regarding this particular geographic region of schools and the parents' perceptions on school quality and their political opinions on education, their responses reflect only their own decisions and cannot comment on parental perceptions outside of their demographic groups, across the entire district, and even less so the state, or the entire country's education system (Thomas, 2016). While case study research can provide "analytic generalizations" that may "establish a logic that might be applicable to other applications," broad, overtly specific, or sweeping generalizations should be avoided (Yin, 2012, p. 18).

Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the methods through which I completed a qualitative case study that interviewed white, middle-class parents within the targeted geographic school zones regarding their perceptions of school quality and political opinions regarding education. Additionally, this chapter explains the processes through which the data was collected and analyzed, so that findings and a subsequent discussion can be presented in chapters four and five.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Overview

Although the specific details of the case are laid out in detail in chapter three, from a bigger perspective this study really is a case of parents who highly value public schools wanting a good education for their children – an education that feels right to them as people and as parents. With this being said, these are three individual stories of parents in their own different ways navigating school choice systems to achieve that goal of a quality public education, but also a singular story of parents wrestling with the desire for a strong public education for their children in a system where neoliberal rhetoric rules. As such, in this chapter I discuss my findings in two forms. First, I describe the individual stories of each family and how they navigated school choice in Goldtown and ultimately settled in public schools they are happy with, and then in the second section examine the common threads shared between these different circumstances through a thematic analysis of their interviews. Note: all interview quotes presented in this chapter are from the participant interviews conducted during data analysis.

Participant Stories

The following sections detail each of the particular ways the three families who were interviewed for this study navigated systems of school choice in Goldtown. In these stories, my participants share their perceptions of both their local public school and the local charter school (research questions 2A and 2B). The participants' stories appear in this chapter according to the order in which the interviews were conducted. The details from these descriptions of their individual school choice journeys come from the interviews described in Chapter 3.

Douglas and Kathryn. Douglas and Kathryn are parents to Campbell and Lee, two elementary-aged boys. Douglas and Kathryn are a white, college-educated couple working in the arts/liberal arts fields and self-described themselves as “upwardly mobile.” Douglas and Kathryn also both grew up in Goldtown, living in what is often considered one of the nicer suburbs of the city, both having attended the traditionally successful Admiral High School, which is widely considered a high-quality school in the Goldtown county school system. They live in an older, historic area just on the outskirts of the downtown area of Goldtown, which is a popular part of town for families like Douglas and Kathryn’s to raise children in a “hip” neighborhood. As this neighborhood has been slowly gentrifying over the last several decades, it has become a popular area for families like Douglas and Kathryn’s. A part of town with history and character, and close to many of the amenities and businesses available downtown. Despite the neighborhood consistently growing and being rehabilitated, however, not all of the nearby schools have followed suit. This has left parents in the area to oftentimes consider options outside of the geographically zoned traditional public schools, just as Douglas and Kathryn did in choosing schools for their young boys.

Perceptions of the locally-zoned public school. As further explored in Elaine’s section later on in this chapter, the first decision that Douglas and Kathryn made that affected their school choice decision-making was moving into their neighborhood, with Kathryn noting their difficulties with school choice and selection began when deciding what part of Goldtown they want to live in. The elementary school their house is zoned for, Holly Elementary, they described as being “not in a great neighborhood.” Additionally, they noted that there is “a lot of transition in that school,” both amongst staff and the students, verifying these perceptions firsthand when they went to visit it before their oldest son, Campbell, began kindergarten. Given

this, Douglas and Kathryn were not especially thrilled at the notion of having to send their sons to Holly Elementary.

Participation in school choice. This led Douglas and Kathryn to begin investigating other options besides Holly Elementary. Using Goldtown School's transfer system, Douglas and Kathryn attempted to enroll Campbell at a nearby magnet elementary, Belle Valley, but were unsuccessful their first year and were put on a wait list. So while Douglas and Kathryn would have preferred to enroll Campbell at Belle Valley right away, Goldtown's first charter school happened to be opening that same year, Crystal Charter. As detailed in chapter two, charter schools have been operating in Tennessee since the passage of the 2002 legislation, but it took quite some time before a charter school began operating in Goldtown.

Almost on a whim, Douglas and Kathryn decided to fill out an application, and Campbell was offered a spot through Crystal Charter's lottery admission process. Being staunch proponents of public schools, and skeptical at best about charter schools in general, this opportunity was unexpected and outside of what they would normally consider as an option for a school. When they received this offer, Kathryn and Douglas began trying to find out all they could about Crystal Charter. Even though at first they found it difficult to glean any meaningful information about the inner workings of the school or its plans, after several meetings with the Crystal Charter staff, they were told the model the school was based on and how to research it, as well as more information about student expectations and the average school day. Although this transparency reassured Douglas and Kathryn, they admitted they were a bit at a loss as to the real benefits of these decisions, with Campbell being their oldest and this being the first time either of them had to make educational decisions on this scale. At the very least, however, they felt good about them as well as the staff's overall enthusiasm.

In addition to this, Crystal Charter is run by a long-standing and widely trusted, local community organization. Having all of these factors to consider, Douglas and Kathryn had a choice to make. As the beginning of the school year quickly approached and Douglas and Kathryn were left to decide between Holly Elementary, which they were skeptical about, and Crystal Charter, which is new, unknown, and not a traditional public school, the decision was made for Campbell to start kindergarten at Crystal Charter. Kathryn noted that they, “had already spent so much energy trying to get him set up there that at that point” that they wanted to “just try this year out and see what happens.”

Perceptions of local charter school. At the beginning of the school year, Douglas and Kathryn were quite pleased with Crystal Charter. While Campbell began kindergarten already far above grade level, he continued to grow and flourish academically. As the school year went on, however, they began to question some of their initial perceptions of Crystal Charter. First, it became quickly apparent that Douglas and Kathryn’s hope for an authentically diverse and inclusive classroom setting for Campbell was not being realized. While Campbell was there, there were two kindergarten classrooms at Crystal Charter, both of which had roughly thirty students, and Campbell was one of two white students in the whole grade. While the specifics of the demographic breakdown are being closely rounded to maintain the pseudonymity of Crystal Charter, according to publicly available state data, nearly 80% of students that attend the school as a whole are Black or African American.

Additionally, this lack of authentic diversity did not lie exclusively along racial lines. Douglas and Kathryn described how a large percentage of students also came from very low socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the same sources above and similarly obscured, almost 60% of students attending Crystal Charter are described as “economically disadvantaged”

with nearly 90% receiving free or reduced school lunch. While Douglas noted that he is not “incredibly proud” of his feelings of “culture shock,” his and Kathryn’s desire for Campbell to attend a school that represents many cultures and types of people was unfulfilled. Kathryn summed up her wishes for a diverse setting nicely when she noted that she looks for her children’s classrooms to be “a good representation of what I think the basic breakdown in Goldtown is.”

Unfortunately, coupled with their lack of satisfaction with the diversity of Crystal Charter, they also shared how Campbell would come home with stories of students who “came from a lot of behavioral trauma or had experienced a lot of trauma” in their home lives. These stories included “kids being dragged out of class, kicking screaming, fighting, yelling” and teachers having a “very zero tolerance” response and an overall “rigid disciplinarian system.” So, although they wanted to specifically point out that they did not feel like there were any inappropriate teacher responses to student behavior, it was more “drama in the classrooms” than they were comfortable with. With Kathryn and Douglas also wanting a consistently safe and high quality environment for Campbell to attend school in, they began to doubt whether this was the correct school setting for their son.

In addition to the overall classroom environment, Douglas and Kathryn also began to question the school’s focus on a high quantity of work and a longer school day. They described how Crystal Charter “gave a lot of work ... from day one in kindergarten” and that Campbell, “had homework pretty much, at least four times a week, every week,” but that it was homework, “he could do in his sleep most of the time.” After a short amount of time they began to think “it was kind of crazy” and that it was “too much work for a kid that age, because you might just be burning them out” and that at times they just “want[ed] them to play.”

This large amount of work was not just put on the students, however. Being continually impressed by Campbell's academic growth, Douglas and Kathryn saw that "the staff there clearly worked hard, and it seemed like the more you saw it, they were pushed pretty hard by the administration." Douglas and Kathryn linked this intense workload and pushing to one of the undesirable traits from Holly Elementary that they sought to avoid, high teacher turnover, with both of Campbell's teachers leaving mid-school year (although it should be pointed out that Kathryn believes one of them may have left for a medical reason). Additionally, although they did not specifically state that this fed into their questions about the appropriateness of Crystal Charter for Campbell, it should be noted that a large classroom size of 30 students was stated as a reason to avoid Holly Elementary, but Crystal Charter had Kindergarten classrooms of the same size.

Douglas and Kathryn specifically noted that they also began to feel a lack of and a loss of a "neighborhood component to [their] child's education." In the mornings they saw the other kids in the neighborhoods with their parents waiting together to send students off on busses, and did not see any of their neighbors at school events or functions. Both described how this lack of connection from the neighborhood and the school surprised them, being something they did not even realize they valued until they noted its absence.

Lastly, Douglas and Kathryn just began to wonder if some of Crystal Charter's practices were simply just a bit wasted on their son. There was a consistent focus on "rigor," a strict focus on academics over the arts (to the point of likening Crystal Charter to a "boot camp") and creating a college-like environment that professionalized education, but coming from a family of multi-generational college graduates, they began to think that while "that was really wonderful ... it was a bit wasted on our child." So while Douglas and Kathryn specifically state that they

do not mean to disparage Crystal Charter in any way and that Campbell did excel there, stating specifically that “Crystal Charter does do a good service to that community. It just wasn’t, I don’t think it was the right fit for our son,” it was not a choice in schools that proved to be an escape from the more difficult or lower-performing public schools like Holly Elementary that they initially thought it was.

The continuing journey of school choice and perceptions of a new public school.

Although they were considering how to feel about all of these factors together working together and the effects it might have on Campbell, Douglas and Kathryn received the news that Campbell was taken off of the wait list at Belle Valley. While they still had some initial concerns and questions about the magnet school Campbell was about to attend, they made the move. Initially, one of their major concerns was that the honors program within the magnet school would also be lacking the diversity they sought, just swinging the pendulum the opposite way they perceived it at Crystal Charter. They worried the honors students would be isolated and separate from the other students at the school, creating a “private school within a public school.” Douglas and Kathryn noted that there are spots reserved for students who are locally zoned for Belle Valley to participate in the honors program and that while the core classes are divided by students in the honors classes and those that are not, the students interact in specials classes, art classes, and during free times like lunch and recess.

Speaking of arts, they were also much happier with Belle Valley’s much broader curriculum. While describing Crystal Charter as a “boot camp,” Douglas describes Belle Valley as a “theatre troupe.” The changes in the school day did not end there, as they described both a bit of a shorter school day and a refreshing lack of homework until Campbell began the third grade while feeling that the same amount of academic instruction was provided to their child. In

another huge shift from their experiences at Crystal Charter Douglas and Kathryn also noted that with a more authentically diverse student population, they did not have to worry about the social and disciplinary issues that so many of the students there faced. Finally, with more than half of their neighborhood also attending Belle Valley, their need for their public school to feel like an extension of their neighborhood was met.

Elaine. Similar in many ways to Douglas and Kathryn, Elaine has three young children, but only her oldest, Veronica, is old enough to attend elementary school. Elaine's family is also solidly middle class, with Elaine working in higher education and pursuing a graduate degree. Originally from a larger, mid-Western city, Elaine described her own K-12 education as rather idyllic. She had teachers she respected and learned from and who encouraged her. School was tied to family life, with her mother dropping her off at school and waiting to watch her walk up the steps to her school, and her suburban upbringing offering her a safe environment to walk back home once the school day was over. She described her K-12 education as, "a nice little idea of what school was life," while also realizing that it "wasn't the reality for a lot of other kids in different neighborhoods or in different circumstances" due to her solidly middle-class upbringing.

Elaine and her family live in one of the suburbs on the outer edge of the center city area defined by Crystal Charter as their target population. This area is solidly middle-class, but borders some areas which are not, creating school zones that encompass a fairly diverse group of people. Unlike Douglas and Kathryn, however, after moving, Elaine and her husband found themselves quite happy with their locally zoned traditional public school, Mountain View Elementary; in fact, that is one of the primary factors that drew them to the neighborhood. In many ways then, Elaine's story is so familiar that it may not feel like a story of school choice at

all, but after hearing her describe the process through which her daughter attends her current school it is definitely is due to just that, choice.

Perceptions of the locally-zoned public school. Fortunately, Elaine's early perceptions of her locally-zoned public school have been affirmed since her eldest daughter began attending kindergarten there two years ago. From an academic perspective, Elaine was satisfied with Veronica's growth at Mountain View. Elaine stated that Veronica, "has hit the milestones that I've wanted her to hit. She can read now and is reading books by herself or to her little brothers. So that is good. She is learning things that I don't remember learning until much later." This last comment even directly contradicts one of the more common criticisms of public schools in general, that their quality has been diminishing over time (Hatch, 2015; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Ravitch, 2016; Scott, 2014).

Along with Douglas and Kathryn's perception of their chosen public school, Elaine noted her relief that Veronica's academic gains have not come at the cost of massive workloads or extra-long days. Elaine described her thoughts towards Veronica's school work by saying,

I think I've been lucky because the two teachers she has had have not assigned homework, whereas other kindergarten and first grade teachers have. And I guess I'm kind of lucky because one, I don't necessarily, I think there is a time for kids to be kids and that homework is a bit of an added stressor.

While it is important to note that Elaine has noticed other teachers at Mountain View giving homework, meaning a no homework policy was not in place at a schoolwide level, Veronica's teachers themselves had such a policy in place for their classrooms. Again, this is by no means to suggest a lack of rigor or high quality instruction. Elaine felt that "the quality that they're doing during the day and in the class, more than makes up for any sort of homework that she

would have” and that instead they were asked as a family to, “read with your kids, have them read with you, those types of interactive things that they need to be doing,” but nothing, “like a worksheet that a teacher gives us.”

Although I go in to how this affected her school choice decision in more detail later on in this chapter, one of the most vital components to Mountain View for Elaine did not have to deal directly with academics, or even the school day itself, but is that of an afterschool program for Veronica to attend while Elaine and her husband finished their work day. Elaine described the program as essentially an extension of the environment at the school being onsite and “offers a choice over what they can do, but there is a structure to it.” Elaine also described the afterschool program as a place where Veronica could “work on some things, or just read” but was also a place that places value on children partaking in “physical activity” and “crafts.”

Not everything was perfect at Mountain View, however, being that in part Elaine felt a lack of a personal connection between administration, policy, and parents. When asked towards the end of this section of the interview if there were simply anything else Elaine wished to tell me about Mountain View, she began talking about the school administration’s way of enforcing the attendance policy. Elaine shared how Veronica missed a few days of school for an out-of-town family wedding, and then later on in the school year Veronica was sick on two separate occasions. With the constant message being told to the parents that children should stay home if they have a fever, Elaine thought nothing of it and kept Veronica home when she was sick. The last absence was Veronica’s fifth day home from school. Elaine was shocked then that shortly after she was sent a “pretty harsh letter from the school” that she was “taken aback by.”

While Elaine recognized that “attendance is a big for schools in general,” she felt its overall tone was severely lacking. Elaine elaborated on this even more by saying:

My daughter was being monitored for excessive absenteeism and it took me aback because I thought for the first point of contact it was really harsh. It also didn't offer any solutions. The letter said if there is something we can do to help your child's attendance rates, please let us know. And I thought that was more, like, the school system rhetoric and just sort of borrowing language from administrative policy and not translating it well and that a letter to parents. I mean, I work in higher education. I work with students. I'm used to crafting those types of things and for a first grader? Not good... you know? So that was the only thing that bothered me because I felt like, I know what is going on with my kid, but what if I was a parent that needed some help, that letter would not give me any direction on what I needed to do. It was more about blame. Putting the blame on the parents.

To Elaine, this letter stated several things about her as well as sending a message about the administration itself. In describing the letter itself as "harsh" and "not offer[ing] any solutions," Elaine positioned the letter as something unhelpful and creating a divide between the school and the parents, involving something that is either not an issue at all, as in Elaine and Veronica's case, or something that is very much a problem, which a parent might very well need authentic help with.

For Elaine, this letter lacked any kind of personal feeling to it. Being the first time the school was contacting Elaine about her daughter's absences and setting that harsh initial tone, Elaine described the feeling more like being attacked than helped, noting how "it was more about blame." Working in higher education herself and having to deal with translating large-scale policy to an individual level, Elaine's description of this event suggested a concern over poor administrative handling of policy, and that the school had a higher level of concern for

bureaucratic issues than establishing meaningful relationships with parents and families or authentic solutions to problems. Although Elaine followed this up by pointing out that this, “is the only thing in the year and a half that she has been in that school that I’ve felt a bit uneasy about,” it was nonetheless a large concern for her and a complicated one at that.

Participation in school choice. Even though it does not fit the most commonly thought of definition of school choice (Brighthouse, 1999; Kuhn, 2014; Logan, 2018; Russakoff, 2015), and is not as elaborate a story as Douglas and Kathryn’s, Elaine and her family’s process to moving to Goldtown and buying a house was one that was focused on a selection of schools. First, Elaine noted that they were looking specifically at “good public schools.” Although Mountain View, the school her daughter currently attends, was not the sole school her family considered and found acceptable, Elaine did suggest that the list of neighborhoods they looked for houses in was determined by these schools and not the other way around. So rather than moving into a neighborhood per se, Elaine and her family were moving into a school zone. Elaine even noted that when looking at real estate websites, information on the locally zoned traditional public schools was linked directly to a specific house’s page. It should be noted here that there are many who look to these types of websites as inaccurately measuring the quality of a school due to their sole or at best extensive reliance on test scores (Barnum & LeMee, 2019; Hasan & Kuman, 2019; McKay, 2018; Strauss, 2017). Elaine noted that there were many criteria her husband weighed when determining what makes a public school good. While taking these websites’ recommendations in mind, they were far from Elaine’s sole determining factor.

When considering what makes a school good, Elaine and her family had as wide a set of criteria as Douglas and Kathryn. While traditional metrics of school quality like test scores mattered to Elaine, she displayed a level of skepticism towards them as well. Elaine stated that

tests are “a good reflection of a school,” but that testing is not something she wanted to encourage more of, noting a need for a “fine balance” when considering test scores. Like Douglas and Kathryn, diversity was something Elaine described as being incredibly important in selecting a school. Unlike Douglas and Kathryn, however, Elaine noted that a school with a quality after school program made available through the school was necessary as both she and her husband work.

Lastly, Elaine and her family had specific criteria for their school/home location they wanted met from both a geographic and socio-spatial perspective. The house and school needed to be located near each other, as well as be centrally located to important and oft-traveled to places like a pediatrician’s office. And while I will go into this in much further detail in the latter half of this chapter, Elaine also wanted the school and neighborhood to have a specific feel to it. For Elaine, they needed to be places where “the kids knew each other ... would eventually ride the bus together, whether later on in elementary school or through middle school.” Elaine’s comments here also hint at the importance of this on a temporal level, noting the importance of these things not only now or in the short term, but for a sense of consistency for years down the line for her oldest daughter, Veronica, and also for her younger children not yet in school.

Perceptions of local charter school. Despite living in the part of town and attending a school in the target area, Elaine had very little previous knowledge about Crystal Charter. Elaine was very focused on sending her children to a traditional public school and focused nearly exclusively on the local public schools. Additionally, Elaine stated that when she, “talked to other parents, either their kids are in a Catholic school or one of the big private schools or one of the public schools” and that even outside of conversations with people, she had not “heard much about charter schools since living in Goldtown for the past four years.” This then begs the

question about why someone who was in the target geographic zone for recruitment to Crystal Charter heard incredibly little about it, even to the point of Elaine herself questioning why there was not more talk about charter schools in Goldtown.

What she does know about Crystal Charter, however, is that they are governed by a well-established local organization she had heard good things about, but that is all. This also will be discussed in further detail in the latter half of the chapter, but it is important to note at this point when asked about her familiarity with Crystal Charter, that Elaine specifically states, “in my school choice ... what was on my radar was public school or private school.” So, although the charter school does not come up in her consideration about schools, she called her decision to move into a neighborhood for the purpose of having access to a quality school district a school choice.

David and Diane. Like the other participants in this study, David and Diane are a white, middle-class family with an elementary aged son, James, attending a Goldtown public school. They live in a very recent up-and-coming part of center city Goldtown that is currently experiencing a surge of business and economic growth. This has spurred many younger adults/families like David and Diane to move to the area, buying and renovating homes, as well as changing the demographics and even rezoning districts of some of the schools in the area. Many of these schools in this part of Goldtown are not thought of as being as high of quality as their counterparts in the further out, more stereotypically suburban neighborhoods, but the recent gentrification of this part of Goldtown has resulted in more focus put on their schools.

As to David and Diane themselves, Diane comes from a quintessentially suburban town nearby Goldtown. She attended a large, well-funded public high school that she described as having “really good teachers, really good programs.” The school was large enough to offer

many higher level honors and advanced classes, which she took advantage of and excelled in and said how they more than prepared her for her first year of college. She described her teachers in equally positive ways, noting that they, “were really great” and that they care a whole lot” while positively being “more strict than a lot of my teachers at university in the early years.”

David’s education, however, was in many ways the opposite. David comes from an adjacent southern state, but grew up in a much smaller, rural community. He described his schools as being equally small, serving roughly 300 students in grades 7 through 12. There were not as many available teachers in his school as compared to Diane’s, and consequently he did not have access to the same types of advanced courses while attending high school. Despite noting how his high school was “underfunded” when compared to his wife’s, he did feel as though his public education still prepared him to succeed in college.

Perceptions of the locally-zoned public school. When it comes to their son’s education story, David and Diane’s story starts similarly to that of Douglas and Kathryn’s, in that their initial trip to their locally-zoned public school was not the most positive experience for them. James attended pre-school at a local, private Montessori school that they were pleased with, but David and Diane knew that they would eventually want James in the local public school system. When James was preparing to enter Kindergarten, then, they visited their locally-zoned public school, Adena Elementary, but Diane noted that, “neither one of us really felt a good vibe or connection there.” David followed up that, “there didn’t seem to be the same sense of community,” something they felt strongly at James’s preschool. This lack of a positive connection extended to their interactions with staff as well. Diane described how when they entered a classroom she just felt “overwhelmed” by the teacher and simply that, “it just didn’t feel right.”

David and Diane also described how they felt the teachers at Adena had low expectations of their students. They shared a story how during this initial visit and meeting, they were speaking with a teacher while James was sitting on a carpet and pointing out various shapes, something David feels that, “all kindergartners should know” to the level James was pointing out. While David and Diane considered this something James should definitely be able to do at this point in his development, the teacher seemed quite impressed with his ability to recognize these shapes. Diane followed this up by expressing her worries about low expectations for the students at Adena Elementary. She worried that James was, “not going to be stimulated enough” at Adena, something that would most likely slow James’s academic growth or cause any number of other negative side effects from being bored or disengaged at school.

Participation in school choice. This initial visit to Adena left David and Diane feeling like it was not the right school for James. It was at this point that they began looking towards other options. They decided to initiate a transfer to another nearby elementary school that they felt a positive connection to, Clyde elementary. Clyde elementary is close to their home, Diane’s family, as well as her work. They thought a transfer would be relatively simple. It turned out, however, that this was not the case.

First, gaining access just to visit the school and staff proved difficult. There was an online form that Diane and David filled out with the county, but there was no follow-up invitation to visit the school. When they took it upon themselves to go and plan their own visit, David and Diane were simply told that it was “not a good time.” In addition to this, they were shortly after informed that their application for James to be enrolled at Clyde Elementary was declined. Faced with the thought of James attending Adena Elementary, their locally zoned public school that they were unhappy with, David and Diane decided to keep James at the private

Montessori school he was attending for preschool. While they wanted James to attend a public school, David and Diane's desire for a consistently high quality and engaging environment for their son would not be met by sending him to Adena Elementary.

This is, of course, not to suggest that David and Diane were overly dissatisfied by James's education at his private Montessori school. They felt "a great sense of community" at that school, coupled with an amazing teacher. Additionally, with the much smaller Montessori class, James would stay with the same students all throughout his elementary education, even further adding to that sense of community. With the "small, tight-knit community" and a teacher that cared deeply for James' education, David and Diane knew that James's educational needs would be met and that he would be seen as an individual child, rather lost in a "big school ... just running through the motions" that she feared would happen at one of the larger public schools.

David and Diane tried again a year later to transfer James to Clyde Elementary, but were again unsuccessful. And while they were happy enough to keep James at his Montessori school, their desire for a public education was still lingering. Additionally, there were a few things that they found lacking at Montessori. Diane described how they were not happy with certain aspects, such as the cost, lack of diversity, and non-academic parts of the school day like gym or music class. Apart from having to pay out of pocket for that kind of education, there were things they knew a public school could offer.

Like Douglas and Kathryn and Elaine alike, David and Diane also wanted James to experience authentic diversity as part of his education. They wanted to feel like his school day was part of him "being in the real world." They described the demographic makeup of his Montessori class as being in "very similar group of people who all had the same socioeconomic status" that did not represent "the real world." They wanted James to have "exposure to all

different kinds of people just like it is in real life.” Knowing that there were these deficiencies, despite the difficulty of the decision due to all of satisfaction they had at Montessori, David and Diane began to explore other options for James to attend a public school that they approved of.

The continuing journey of school choice and perceptions of a new public school.

Having received two transfer denials to enroll James at Clyde Elementary, David and Diane changed tactics, deciding it was just simply time to enroll James in a public school. They decided to check out a different school in their part of Goldtown, Goldtown Elementary. While Clyde Elementary seemed closed off and inaccessible, Goldtown Elementary’s “administration was very welcoming.” Even during early, introductory meetings, David told the story about how the staff were excited about the possibilities open for James to join various groups or activities at the school. Diane continued this story noting that the staff were, “setting really high goals for him. Like, he should be on the student council, or he should be a leader. You know? Just feeling confident about him and not really knowing how he was going to do.”

With this positive, “personal interest” in James, they decided to go through with the transfer for James to attend Goldtown Elementary. While David described this process as still a bit bureaucratic with the:

paperwork and all,” the transfer to Goldtown Elementary was drastically different than their attempted transfers to Clyde Elementary. The principal told them that “‘you’ve done what you need to do, I’ve got it from here’ and we didn’t have to keep checking back or anything like that. She tried to help us minimize whatever paperwork was needed. She just made the process easy, it seemed like.

David and Diane's only issue with the transfer was that due to the differences in curriculum between a private Montessori school and the county public school system, there were specific gaps between what James already knew and what he was expected to know.

In particular, Diane singled out not knowing a set of specific "math facts." Although some of James's peers who also had transferred from Montessori to Goldtown Elementary wound up having to be held a year back, David felt that the Goldtown Elementary staff "were able to identify [his strengths and weaknesses] and take steps early on to correct it." And while Diane described herself as feeling "overwhelmed" by this whole process of catching James up, she and David were quite happy with how his teacher responded. She noted it was difficult and took a lot of time on all of their parts, through "extra tutoring during the day" for "three or four weeks" and working with James after school, he was quickly caught up to the point where he is now "excelling."

Outside of this initial extra tutoring, Diane also detailed how Goldtown Elementary is also "not really a homework school," which she greatly appreciates. They still work after school on small things in the same way that Elaine described Veronica's work at Mountain View, but there is still time "to still do baseball and go to dinner" and that they, "didn't feel like [they] had to come home and 'oh, my gosh do homework for two hours.'" The school day itself was also more broadly focused than at Montessori. James was now having time in the school day for music, art, and gym, and "is involved in STEM scouts and he is playing on the basketball team, so not just in academics and also with the things to do after school." The last piece that David and Diane felt was missing from James' education at Montessori, diversity, was now met at Goldtown Elementary. Diane described how James "meets all kinds of different kids," rather

than the very homogeneous racial and socioeconomic group of children in James's classes at his Montessori school.

The transfer to a public school has not alleviated all of David and Diane's concerns about education, however. David and Diane are exceptionally happy with James's current class and teacher, but unlike their experience at Montessori, Diane worries about James having, "a totally different teacher and it might be a totally different experience." With the simply wider range of experiences and the larger scale of public school systems, James could very well have a much worse experience next year. While Diane did not cite a specific examples of poor quality teachers she has experienced or heard about at Goldtown Elementary, having been through a large public school system herself, she notes there is always a "mister so and so," someone who might not be considered a great teacher for whatever reason, or that her son might simply "do as well with [a] teacher because of a certain personality." To illustrate this point, in the interview my immediate reaction was to mention my own third grade teacher who I simply just did not get along with. Despite their fears over the potential for this wide variability in public education, Diane and David mentioned time and time again throughout the interview how pleased they are with their decision to send James to Goldtown Elementary.

Perceptions of local charter school. Similarly to Elaine, Crystal Charter was never a consideration for David and Diane to send James to. While they were vaguely familiar with Crystal Charter's parent foundation and the work it does in the community, notably an afterschool sports program, David simply stated that he does not "know enough about Crystal Charter to make a judgment" about the school or their presence in the community. Both David and Diane had opinions about charter schools, however, including the reasons they chose not to

pursue one for James, and that information will be discussed in depth later on in this chapter alongside the other participants' perceptions on charter schools in general.

A Shared Understanding of Public Schools and School Choice

The second half of this chapter presents a thematic analysis of the three participant interviews as a whole. As laid out in chapter three, the interviews were thematically coded to provide insight into how parents perceive various types of schools, as well as the ways in which neoliberal political discourse relates to their thoughts on charter and public schools. This latter half of the chapter is divided into three main sections to present findings on (a) what parents want out of public schools, (b) their desire for better public schools, and (c) the difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems. These larger headings were formed by categorizing the eleven major themes developed from the three rounds of coding during analysis.

The major themes, the sections they are presented in, the total number of instances across the three interviews, the interviews the theme derived from, and the research question(s) they address are presented in table 5. Following this table, the quantities of each larger theme and the subthemes which comprise them are presented in a hierarchy pie graph, figure 5. This chart shows the total quantity of each instance of the larger themes across the three interviews, as well as the quantities of each subtheme comprising them.

Table 5
Finalized Themes

Theme	Ch. 4 section	Quantity	Interview	RQs
Bureaucracy negatively affects public education	Desire for better public schools	34	1,2,3	1
Educational funding models reduce equity and increases the need for school choice	Desire for better public schools	27	1,2,3	1
Happy with child's education	What parents want out of public schools	11	1,2,3	2a
Local school choice works, but larger systemic changes to public education would be better	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems	18	1,2,3	1 and 2b
Parents agonize over school choice	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems	29	1,2,3	1 and 2c
Privatization adds unnecessary complications and influences to public schools, negatively affecting their purpose	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems	25	1,2,3	1 and 2c
School choice is about more than just picking a school	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems	41	1,2,3	1
Schools need to be about more than grades	What parents want out of public schools	30	1,2,3	1, 2a and 2b
Schools and teachers should be consistently safe and of high quality	What parents want out of public schools	31	1,2,3	1, 2a, and 2b
Social inequity permeates public schools	Desire for better public schools	17	1 and 3	1
Students need authentically diverse schools	What parents want out of public schools	16	1,2,3	2a and 2b

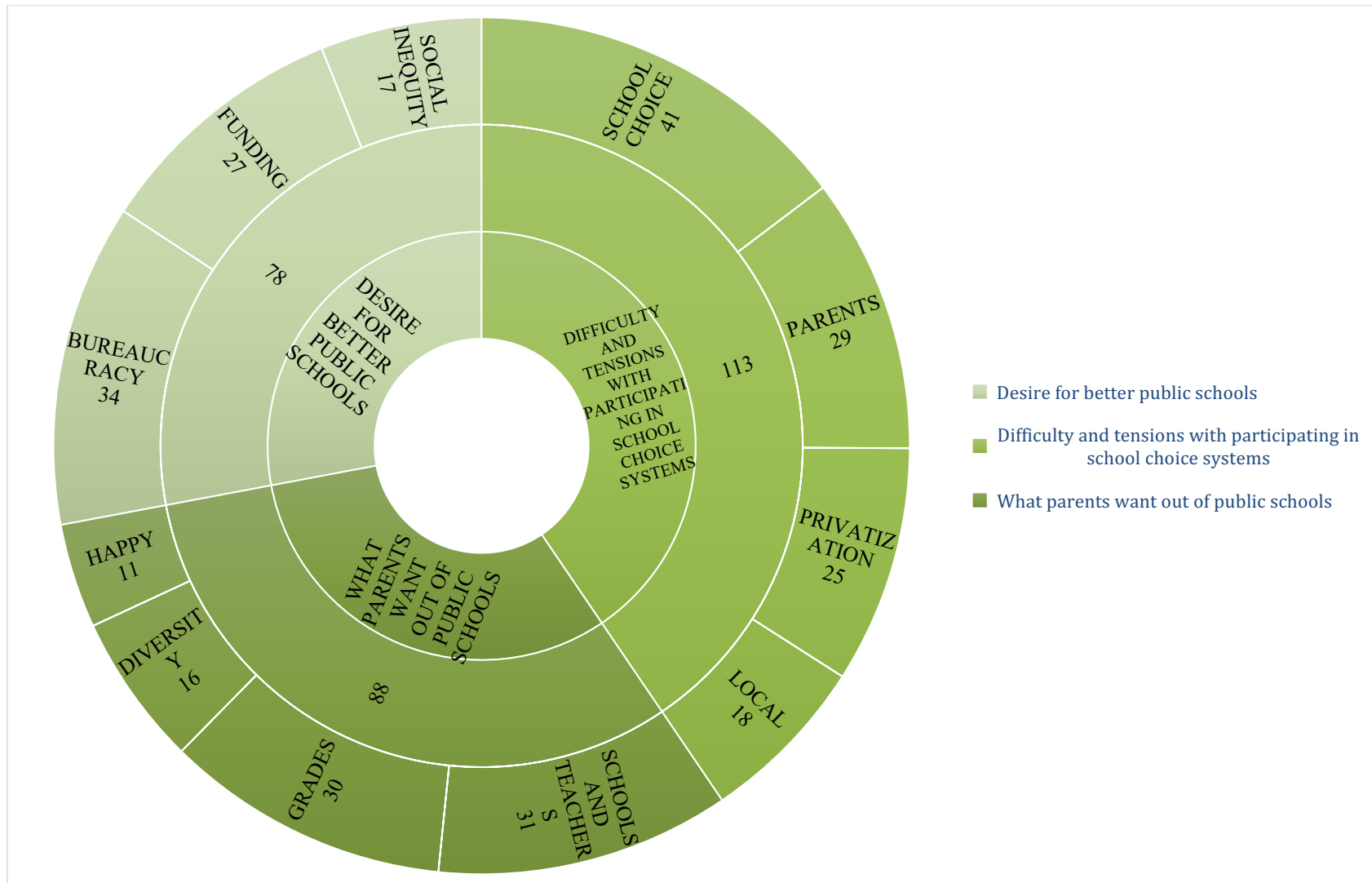


Figure 5: *Quantity of themes and subthemes in comparison to each other*

What parents want out of public schools. In this section, I present what the parent participants described they were and are looking for in a quality public school that they would be happy to send their child(ren) to. This section is comprised of four distinct themes: (a) Schools needing to be about more than grades, (b) how schools and teachers should be consistently safe and of high quality, and (b) that students need authentically diverse schools. A fourth theme (d) the parents' happiness with their current school choice was found across all three interviews and will be discussed at the end of this section, but it does not have major implications on the research questions and as such will only be briefly described.

Schools needing to be about more than grades. One of the more prevalent themes that came up when my participants were sharing what they wanted out of public schools was their desire for public schools and education in general to be about more than just strict academic growth, grades, and test scores.

First, all of my participants expressed quite a bit of happiness that their child[ren]'s current schools are not homework-centered. For Douglas and Kathryn, when Campbell began kindergarten at Crystal Charter, they were shocked at how intense the day was. The school year itself, "started so much earlier than Belle Valley," so that there was roughly an extra "fifteen percent more instruction per year." While more instruction itself was not a huge worry for them, their concern grew when the homework started. Douglas described how "he [James] had homework, had homework pretty much, at least four times a week, every week" taking Douglas slightly aback. This lengthier school year coupled with the near-daily homework made Douglas begin to wonder if "too much work for a kid that age, because you might just be burning them out," to which Kathryn added that because Campbell was still a child after all that, "you want them to play." This proved a pretty stark contrast to Campbell's experience at their chosen

public school, Belle Valley, when he did not have any homework “until third grade,” despite the fact that Douglas and Kathryn felt no real difference in Campbell’s academic growth with the exception of the pure quantity of work. So again, while Douglas and Kathryn were not wholly unhappy with their and Campbell’s experiences at Crystal Charter, they were more pleased with the way academics were stressed at Belle Valley.

Elaine expressed similar thoughts about her daughter’s specific teachers in comparison to other teachers at Mountain View Elementary. Although other teachers at Veronica’s school did give homework, Elaine is pleased that Veronica did not have any, as she believed “there is a time for kids to be kids and that homework is a bit of an added stressor.” When Elaine went over what Veronica has accomplished during the school day, she noted that Veronica, “comes home tired” and that “the quality that they’re doing during the day and in the class, more than makes up for any sort of homework that she would have.” This is not to say that no academic learning was happening at home, but instead Veronica’s teachers encouraged their family to “read with your kids, have them read with you, those types of interactive things that they need to be doing, but it is not like a worksheet that a teacher gives us.” With these types of interactive activities, learning was still happening and there was a focus on academics, but it was accomplished in a way that encourages the family to spend time together. This situates after school learning as more than a worksheet or workbook, letting Veronica learn without the added stress that Elaine mentioned.

Diane also described Goldtown Elementary as “not really a homework school,” which she added that she “loves.” While James did not have homework at his previous Montessori school, Diane was concerned his transition to a public school would mean an increase in homework and noted that she, “worried about him coming into this huge change.” Instead, “they

don't, they're not a homework school, but we do basically every night we worked on a little bit of math facts." Similar to Elaine, there was no specific assignments or worksheet type homework, but rather they worked together as a family on an identified area of need in a more relaxed type of way. This allowed them to make sure there was still time in the evenings for things that they enjoyed as a family, like "baseball and go to dinner and we didn't feel like we had to come home and "oh, my gosh" do homework for two hours."

My participants noted a desire for not only a more well-rounded school/home life, but for their children to have a more well-rounded education in general. The parents interviewed did not want high academic performance at any cost. When discussing the potential for schools to compete with each other and a theoretical charter school coming into her neighborhood, Elaine noted that for her, it is not all about test scores and rigor. She said that even if the test scores in a hypothetical charter school were higher, she would want to know the following:

Well, what were they doing with the tests? Were they test-taking every day? Or what was that like for them in that environment? Is it very rigid and too structured, I wouldn't like it even if they were outperforming? But if they were doing this very experiential and innovative stuff and more outside of the classroom, then that might be something that I'd be interested in, actually.

High test scores as a metric itself would not be impressive to Elaine if they came at the cost of test-fatigue and an overly rigorous school day that lacked significant time in the school day for her children to experience learning in multi-faceted ways. Douglas also plainly stated that schools that "teach to TCAPs or whatever standardized test ... seems to be not the healthiest way to educate kids," directly equating an overreliance on testing and teaching to said tests is unhealthy for children.

This desire for a well-rounded education also meant that the participants' children should have a broadly focused education. Douglas and Kathryn wanted their children in a school that, "does a good job of keeping them active," like Belle Valley's focus on "dance ... and the amount of outdoor recess time they have." Douglas even shared his surprise that some schools are known to "have them sitting inside at desks most of the day and then you're just pumping them full of 40 grams of sugar." For Douglas and Kathryn, part of a well-rounded education is active and healthy students and an environment at schools, like Belle Valley, that strongly emphasize this. Douglas even went on to say he felt so strongly about this that inactive, unhealthy children "is just not good for our country in any way." David and Diane expressed a similar happiness with Goldtown Elementary in that it provided opportunity for James to be active in gym class and do things like participate in "the basketball team" and not have a focus "just in academics."

Schools and teachers should be consistently safe and of high quality. It was important for each of the participants to have a class setting and overall school feeling that resembled a neighborhood, and even the neighborhood that they specifically selected to move in to. When they finally settled on the successful transfer to Goldtown Elementary, Diane noted her pleasant surprise that,

It feels like a little family. It doesn't feel like public school. When I was considering public school, I was a little bit intimidated. I was thinking big school, lots of kids and just running through the motions. I mean, I was nervous about it because at the Montessori school we do have such a small, tight-knit community, but I was surprised to find that exact same feeling here. Really happy with that and all of the people and all of the teachers and especially the resource officer. They all demonstrate how much they care and create the community environment.

Diane was admittedly nervous that James's school might resemble the overly large and somewhat impersonal public school that she attended as a student, but these worries were quickly assuaged after spending some time there. Diane described how it was not only the classroom setting itself that felt like a community, but the whole school and the staff.

Elaine wanted this type of setting for her children also, recalling her own experience as a child with her, "mom driving me to elementary school and waiting for me to go up to the steps to go to school. And I could walk home in the afternoons. And so that was a nice little idea of what school was like." Elaine described a direct connection between the community and the school, "where the kids knew each other. That they went to school together." This was something that Douglas and Kathryn found as well with Belle Valley but was noticeably lacking with their experiences at Crystal Charter and their previous visits to Holly Elementary. When describing their experiences visiting and talking to friends about Holly Elementary, they noted that "there is a lot of transition" and "a lot of homeless kids." While they wanted to make sure they meant no judgment at all towards the children in this situation, they questioned whether this was a school that exemplified the neighborhood feel they desired for Campbell. They described classroom sizes with "a massive amount of kids," but that due to the transient nature of the student population, of "the ones who had started the year there had been like a forty percent churn" by the end of the school year. Douglas and Kathryn wanted the safe, consistent environment for Campbell to thrive in and not have to worry about constant student turnover that could negatively affect his education.

David and Diane along with Douglas and Kathryn also wanted this kind of consistency for and from their children's teachers. Talking specifically of the staff at Goldtown Elementary, Diane and David were overjoyed that James had teachers who had "really high goals for him"

and showed that they were “feeling confident about him.” David and Diane wanted teachers that would be on James’s side and consistently want the best for him. Douglas and Kathryn were also happy with the quality of Campbell and Lee’s teachers at Belle valley. Kathryn stated that, “they are both doing very well, and they don’t come home from school saying they were bored. They also don’t seem stressed out,” crediting their teachers for accomplishing this.

In all three interviews, my participants noted they want their children in schools that valued and respected teachers, just like they personally do. Douglas noted that, “It seems like teacher pay has gotten better over the years, but it still seems they work too hard and spend too much of their own time off and their own money to have to do what they have to do.” Elaine also shared that in her opinion, “put in a lot of their own time and their own money, even for a lot of different projects.” Elaine agreed by saying,

they’re overworked. The work doesn’t stop, and the personality they need to want to be a personality to begin with, they’re going to put their all into it. So they’re going to sit at home after hours and work on stuff, and prepare little, cute things for the kids because they care. So it is a lot; it is a big job.

All of my participants shared their high esteem for teachers and the teaching profession, describing their thoughts on the difficult work that teachers selflessly do, and oftentimes for little pay. David then summed up why caring about teachers and teaching as a profession should matter to parents by stating, “we definitely need to keep the teachers comfortable and a happy teacher is going to be a better teacher, plain and simple.” For my participants, by wanting high quality and consistent teachers at their children’s schools meant that they as parents and individuals needed to care about the conditions teachers are working in.

Students need authentically diverse schools. The last way that the interviewed participants discussed as being important in selecting their current school was a school setting that was authentically diverse. When asked what factors made them choose their school, each of the participants listed diversity as an important and vital characteristic of a school they wanted their children at. For Douglas and Kathryn as well as David and Diane, this also extended them defining what diversity means to them, and why it was important.

Douglas and Kathryn really emphasized a more authentic diversity than simply putting their child at a school that skews to being a school full of only people of color or of lower-socioeconomic status. Douglas and Kathryn wanted Campbell to be in a school setting that had “a good representation of what [Kathryn] thinks the basic breakdown in Goldtown is.” When he was at Crystal Charter, however, “Campbell was the only white kid in his class of thirty-two kids,” referencing Crystal Charter’s large Black/African American majority. While that may commonly be seen as a “diverse” environment, Douglas and Kathryn wanted Campbell in a situation that represented society at large, instead of just trading one extreme representation of racial identity for another.

This was also one of the criticisms David and Diane held of their Montessori school. Diane described how James’s class was, “a very similar group of people who all had the same socioeconomic status and that is not like the real world. We just wanted exposure to all different kinds of people just like it is in real life.” For both Campbell and James, their parents wanted real, authentic diversity that represented many different kinds of people. Kathryn went on to explain why she valued this so much for her children:

For our kids to be challenged by being around different kinds of families and kids. I remember telling people that my kids are smart. They’re going to be fine academically I

think, anywhere they go. But what they need help with is learning how to get along with other people. That is really important to me in this era.

What Kathryn wanted for her children was an opportunity to learn from other children with diverse experiences that resembles “real life,” as Diane went on to phrase it. Kathryn wanted her children to have an opportunity to “learn to be good citizens ... that they have some kind of understanding of civics” so that they can learn how to be participants in a free, democratic society.

Happy with child’s education. Although it does factor largely into the broader category of what my participants want out of the public school their child attends, all of the parents described their happiness with their child[ren]’s current public school throughout their respective interviews. For instance, Douglas and Kathryn discussed their satisfaction with the level of academic rigor at Belle Valley, Elaine described her happiness with Veronica meeting “the milestones that [she] wanted her to hit,” and David and Diane were pleased with the way Goldtown Elementary “identify[ied] where some of James’s weaknesses were and put a little bit more focus in those areas,” catching him up on some of the Goldtown Schools specific skills that he did not receive at his private Montessori school. Despite this notion not directly addressing the notion of what parents want out of public schools, it does speak to the fact that at this point in these families’ school choice journeys, they sought out specific public schools that met their criteria for a quality public school and are pleased with the schools’ and their child[ren]’s results.

Parents’ desire for better public schools. In this section I present what the participants expressed they wished public schools universally did better. As noted in the first half of the chapter, all of the parents interviewed had a favorable view overall of public education, even to the point of finding various creative ways to enroll their children in quality public schools.

Having to find those ways to choose a school they were satisfied with because their local neighborhood school was not one they were happy with, was not something they wanted to do, but rather something required in order for their children to receive a good public education. In these conversations, then, the parents expressed several notions about how public schools overall could improve.

This section is comprised of three distinct themes found across the three interviews: (a) How bureaucracy negatively affects public education, (b) how educational funding models reduce equity and increases the need for school choice, and (c) that social inequity permeates public schools.

Bureaucracy negatively affects public education. When asked about public schools and government regulation, the participants across all three interviews brought up the negative effect of bureaucracy on public education. While none of the participants took strong stances nor mentioned anything along the lines of bureaucracy ruining education or being a justification for the existence of charter schools, it was still a factor that worked against quality public schools, school systems, or ways to choose a quality public school.

All three parents did bring up the often-heard notion that regulation or bureaucratic procedures reduce the level of innovation allowed in public schools, while addressing that charter schools or other forms of school choice can be free from this type of restriction (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Hatch, 2015; Martinez & Garcia,). In the above section, I point out how schools need to be more than just grades, and this idea is mirrored in how my participants compared public schools to charter schools and how they wished public schools had the same freedoms to innovate that charters have in their perspective.

Elaine described her experience with public schools by noting how, “the curriculum at a public school is probably pretty narrow and pretty like, these are the milestones, these are the outcomes. These are what the students need to have by, you know, X date.” In comparison she described how when, “I think about charter schools in the same way I think about Montessori schools as well, like maybe the curriculum could be a bit more open,” to the point of stating that she “just feel[s] like one is very traditional, one is very non-traditional.” Elaine clearly is pleased with the overall quality of education at Mountain View, as described earlier in this chapter, but high quality does not necessarily mean it is above improvement and that a more innovative and open curriculum free of some of the regulation could be even better.

Although she did not elaborate on this in much detail, Diane echoed this sentiment when describing the pull she felt between liking specific aspects of their previous experiences when James attended a private Montessori school with wanting him to attend a public school. While her desire for the Montessori style of education did not outweigh her wish for James to have a quality public education, she did note she wished for more districts to be open to the types of curriculums and models public schools could be by noting she “would really love” for Goldtown to have public Montessori schools available like in other parts of the country.

When sharing their stories of finding schools, Douglas and Kathryn as well as David and Diane shared that what made them comfortable with a school and its administration was a welcome openness that dispelled any feelings of closed off bureaucratic control. Douglas and Kathryn when they toured Crystal Charter and spoke to staff before making any decisions about sending Campbell there, shared how faculty and staff answered any questions they had about the model Crystal Charter is based on and even directly how to locate information about it online.

Before going to the school Douglas described how any information “was a little opaque to understand,” but when going there the school assuaged any of these concerns.

David and Diane experienced both ends of this spectrum when touring schools to send James to. At the first school they attempted to visit, Clyde elementary, they were turned off by the way the bureaucracy of the transfer system seemed to put a distance between them and the school. They described how,

It was a little bureaucratic. Its paperwork and all. But we filled out the transfer request for Clyde Elementary online, she filled it out, and we never had any interaction with the school itself. They didn't invite us into come visit. We filled out the transfer and then we found out two or three months later that we didn't get it. We tried to go visit, remember that? And they were like, oh, now is not a good time. And it just never worked out.

They had the opposite experience when researching the potential for a transfer to Goldtown Elementary.

The online application and paperwork were still required of course, but these kind of bureaucratic details and difficulties were quickly forgotten due to the welcoming nature of the administration. They were able to meet directly with the principal and displayed an excitement about James joining their school. They stated that,

She took a personal interest. She was like, you've done what you need to do, I've got it from here. And we didn't have to keep checking back or anything like that. She tried to help us minimize whatever paperwork was needed. She just made the process easy, it seemed like.

So while Clyde elementary let the bureaucratic processes establish a distance between potential parents and the school, Goldtown Elementary worked around this to invite parents in, even to the point of seemingly utilizing their insider knowledge of the transfer system to work through or even around the bureaucracy.

Similarly, one of the stories that Elaine shared spoke to how schools, even the one that she is happy her daughter attends, can put an adherence to policy over parents and students. As detailed in the earlier half of this chapter, she shared that a concern over the attendance policy, most likely put in place to ensure that children are attending school and receiving the education they deserve, was polluted to become about a harshly worded letter home for missing a set number of days. This letter became “more about blame” and “didn’t offer any solutions,” so that any indication about the intent of the policy or how this policy might be attended to benefit students and families was lost behind harshly worded bureaucratic language. This language then created strife between Elaine and a faceless policy, rather than being an open hand to help a potentially struggling parent.

There also seemed to be an understanding about bureaucracy and the overall relationship it has with large social programs like public education. Douglas shared that, “It seems Goldtown is slow to change in any way shape or form. But on a national level it is probably even harder to.” While there is obviously an unhappiness with this slowness to change, resulting in the lack of innovation discussed above, Douglas noted that this is a difficult issue to address, especially when the size and scale of the education system is considered. Elaine used similar language when describing how her daughter’s school is “kind of inching along.”

Although undesirable to say the least, both Elaine and David and Diane mentioned that this slow moving and bureaucratic association with public education is because of what the

government provides and affords public education. Elaine equated this directly to funding and that with any kind of money and payment from the government, there is going to be some level of control and accountability. She stated that with “the government giv[ing] funding, there are certain things that they have to expect back.” Public education is not free and with the enormity of its cost, there are quality assurances and expectations that are inevitably associated with that (Tennessee Department of Education, 2017). Similarly, David and Diane noted that bureaucracy is just the cost associated with having a free government education.

Interestingly, David associated bureaucracy not solely as the fault of a public program, but due at least in part to the heavily politicized discussion of education and a fault of private enterprise’s involvement in the educational sphere. He stated that “bureaucracy [is] associated with the politicization of public education” and “if you start to throw in other private entities who’s goal ... may not always be in everyone’s best interest” that “what a small group of individuals wants isn’t necessarily for the greater good” before finishing his thought that he “like[s] to keep public, public and private, private.” So, while bureaucracy may be, in David’s words, “always going to be there” and “a known evil that we’re going to have,” it is exacerbated by the political tensions between public and private involvement in education and the private individuals and institutions who have different, ulterior or at least secondary motivations when entering the realm of public education that go beyond the simple desire to provide a free, quality education through the public school system.

Educational funding models reduce equity and increases the need for school choice.

Although it has been established throughout this chapter that all of the participants highly valued public schools and sought various ways for their children to attend them, each family spoke quite contrarily to the standard neoliberal talking point of schools being overly funded. Each

participant specifically pointed to inequitable funding as one of the chief culprits that caused certain public schools to be better than others.

Overall, the participants described how schools overall are in dire need of more and better funding. Douglas and Kathryn and David and Diane very explicitly stated that all schools need and deserve better funding. David stated that, “if you look at public education and the way it is currently funded, I think we need to be pushing more money into our public education system.” He continued in noting that more school choice options that extended into privatization would, “potentially divert money from public education and into some of these private institutions.” Even though James attended a school they were happy with, they described how the school and teachers send out messages noting a constant need for items, both big and small. Diane noted that they, “get emails from teachers saying we need this; can someone buy this?” to which David followed up that, “every teacher has a need. Whether it’s an art supply, or just some zip-loc baggies or hand wipes or notebooks. It is always something.”

While they were not complaining per se that teachers were asking for these items, they were clearly implying that the teachers were not receiving everything needed to fully complete their work. Douglas similarly stated that in his opinion:

What makes a good public school good is a school that doesn’t have to scramble every five minutes for the financial resources they need to do the job. And where teachers aren’t shelling out of their own pockets to provide the students with supplies and the textbooks and the materials that they need to learn. That should be, to me that is a no-brainer.

For David and Douglas alike, for schools to be good schools simply need more and better funding so that students, parents, and teachers do not need to do without, or have to burden

themselves with the cost to teach everyone in a system that is supposed to be funded exclusively through public funding to a satisfactory level.

All five parents also brought up that their public schools have a parent teacher organization (PTO). One of the main, if not the main function of this organization is for external private fundraising to supplement the schools funding, or lack thereof. The PTO at Mountain View that Elaine is part of has an active and thriving PTO. Early on at a parent meeting, the funding arm of the PTO introduced itself, and laid out its organization and goals. Elaine described how, “they came up and said this is what we do. This is what we’re raising money for and we’re able to do this, this, and this and we’re to do this, this, and this.” Adding to this, Elaine noted that the organization is controlled through a specific treasurer and felt that they were “pretty transparent about what they’re trying to do.”

At Mountain View, the situation seemed a bit different than how David described teachers at Goldtown Elementary needing simple, basic supplies. Elaine described the PTO’s funding as “something that is extra,” specifically stating a recent rehabilitation of a gym floor. So while it can be argued that this type of school improvement should still be publicly funded, Elaine found it supplementary or nonessential, whereas David described Goldtown Elementary teachers as needing specific things to do their job. Douglas put his thoughts quite bluntly by stating that, “the fact that you have to rely on a foundation to fund a school says to me that the schools are not being funded the right way.” But just because all three of the schools have a PTO, it does not mean that all of my participants noticed the PTOs operating in equal ways or providing equitable funding for their schools.

David and Diane’s school for instance has a fledgling PTO that lacks the activity and participation many of the established organizations have, which also highlights the way this

supplementary fundraising adds to the funding disparity between public schools. Their school's PTO is currently focused on raising money on a new playground and that they are "hoping to get that funded" due to being "active in fundraising." However, he continued,

not all schools have that. Some schools you have a lot of participation and maybe you've got the ability to raise more money, but then other schools you're not going to have any participation and you hate for that disparity to be in place. So financially it puts one worse off than the other. So maybe the one that doesn't have much PTO support, maybe is the one that probably needs more money, because those kids need a little bit more attention.

Just by the nature that these PTOs are specifically associated with individual schools, by virtue of the student population and their family's socioeconomic status, some schools are able to fundraise more money out of their parents than others.

Additionally, Elaine described the PTO fundraising as further highlighting a system of "haves and have-nots." With their fundraising methods, the PTO conducts auctions and dinners with quite high price tags. Speaking specifically to the fundraising events themselves, Elaine found herself, "skeptical who it is for," noting that, "it is for the wealthier families that attend the school." While she wanted to note that there are other opportunities for families to participate in fundraising, "that are smaller that are more affordable," she noted that the larger projects like the gym floor have "a price tag with that." Elaine did not seem to have an issue with what the money was being spent on or that fundraising was even occurring, necessarily, but that the process itself was inherently exclusionary because some families at Mountain View simply cannot afford to pay additional money beyond the taxes they are already paying. None of the families seemed to indicate at all that they had strong negative feelings about what their PTO

organizations were putting money into, but David's earlier point and Elaine's usage of the word "extra," suggest that the inequity within PTO fundraising only further problematizes the disparity with educational funding overall.

This funding disparity was something brought up by each participant when asked about how they felt in general about the quantity and quality of education funding in the United States. For instance, in noting the way school funding is often associated with property taxes, Elaine stated that with, "the lower income neighborhoods, so the schools were not getting any money, so that was a huge problem." David noted that this was prevalent throughout Goldtown and the surrounding county school systems and how, "you start to see a significant difference from school to school. And you say, Wow! This school has a \$15 million football complex." Diane continued this thought by describing how her high school was one with the multi-million dollar sports facilities, but that other schools throughout the county "hardly has lines painted on the field." David and Diane's point was not so much with how schools were allocating money to their sports teams, but just how the funding inequity from school to school within the same system was obvious to anyone who chose to take a second to look at one school compared to another.

Douglas described a fairly similar set of circumstances from his perspective by noting that, "it sure always seems like the places that have the least funding and have the teachers having to shell out of their pockets the most are in the poor parts of town or the parts of town of color." For these parents who looked around for the type of public school that they were happy sending their child(ren) to, it seems obvious that our public school system is not inherently equal. Instead, schools fall pretty starkly across socioeconomic and racial lines where schools with a wealthier, white student population are funded well, but schools with a higher percentage of

students who have been economically marginalized and/or are people of color, are noticeably and obviously lesser and underfunded.

As previously discussed, all of the participants noted that the best path for American education is to have a strong and robust public education system but had concerns that private interests expanding school choice negatively affects the funding of traditional public schools. David, Kathryn, and Douglas also shared how they felt that this inequity is made even worse by education privatization and the diversion of public funding to charter and voucher programs. Douglas quite bluntly stated that whether “we’re talking about vouchers, or charters, or magnet schools, it goes back to the point to me that the best plan, plan A should be to fund public schools, give teachers what they need, have good schools in all neighborhoods.” Although not necessarily criticizing these forms of school choice, especially considering that his oldest son attended a charter school and both sons now attend a magnet school, Douglas recognized that this is his plan B, and in a roundabout way stating that it would be preferable for these other types of schools not to have to exist.

Simply put, funding and improving traditional public schools would be his preferred route towards quality education in America. This largely stems from the aforementioned fear that charter schools and other forms of school choice would continue the problem of underperforming schools, rather than help alleviate it. For my participants, this largely took the form of concern over outside or ulterior motives beyond just educating students. For Kathryn this took the form of “a money making agenda,” while Douglas extended this out to be “an agenda that isn’t based on how we most properly educate our kids.” Additional forms of school choice for both Douglas and Kathryn provided an opportunity for others to take away educating students as the primary function and purpose of schools.

David shared a very similar thought by stating that he was “just afraid that it’ll divert money, divert public funds to private institutions when we need to be investing in our public education system.” For these three parents, then, more money overall needs to be allocated towards creating a strong public education system for all of our nation’s children, rather than allocating money to new and different kinds of school systems, especially those that are outside of the public sphere and controlled by private enterprises or organizations.

Social inequity permeates public schools. The final way some of my participants mentioned desiring a stronger public school system was by addressing the inequity that permeates existing public schools, especially the ways in which those goes beyond inequitable funding. Seeing students from a variety of life experiences at both Crystal Charter and at Belle Valley, this theme was most apparent in the interview with Douglas and Kathryn, although was also present to a lesser degree with David and Diane.

When Campbell first began attending Crystal Charter, Douglas and Kathryn noted their surprise at the number of students attending school with Campbell who came from “tough circumstances.” Douglas noted that many of the students lived very “transient” lives, which made going to school and focusing on academics very difficult for them. Many of the students “came from a lot of behavioral trauma or had experienced a lot of trauma.” With so many of Campbell’s classmates having such difficult home lives, Crystal Charter responded by instituting a “rigid disciplinarian system” that was not what they “were aware there would be.” While Douglas noted that “it certainly helped broaden [his] horizons in terms of just understanding what some of these kids were going through,” it also caused Douglas and Kathryn to question whether Campbell’s exposure to those types of situations was in his best interest.

Even though they were “really pleased at first,” they found it more and more difficult to believe that Crystal Charter was the right kind of school for Campbell. Because there was such a high concentration of students with such varying and high needs, it became difficult for Douglas and Kathryn to believe that Campbell’s continued enrollment at Crystal Charter was the correct choice. By then choosing to send Campbell to another school with a lower percentage of students with difficult home lives, Douglas and Kathryn’s school choice highlights the way in which schools are unequally serving disproportionate amounts of students dealing with the inequity that permeates American society. As stated earlier, it is important to note that Douglas and Kathryn were not casting judgment on these students for their more difficult experiences at home, but rather that these experiences manifested themselves at school and the teachers at Crystal Charter had to react accordingly, both of which could negatively affect Campbell.

While they did not experience this same time of situation firsthand, David also noted that in general as it stands right now, “there is always going to be [the] disadvantaged or disenfranchised” and that it is “as much about school as it is the greater community and the home life.” So, while schools are often tasked with curing all forms of social inequity (Scott, 2014; Watkins, 2004), students’ experiences and behavior at schools are symptoms of greater social ills, with some schools shouldering this burden more so than others.

Having Campbell at such a school left Douglas and Kathryn feeling like they were taking advantage of programs and help that was “wasted” on him. Douglas and Kathryn described a strong emphasis at Crystal Charter of a professional college-like environment and building experiences that emphasized a focus on getting a college education. But because Douglas and Kathryn come from a more middle class, college-educated environment themselves, these types of experiences and expectations were already present for their son. This led them to feel like

they were “depriving a kid who would really benefit” from those experiences. Their feelings of this again points to the way in which schools are forced to do with social inequity. Crystal Charter took it upon itself to build these experiences in to their curriculum, whereas Belle Valley did not have to because it serves a population of students who come from family backgrounds more like Campbells. Again, this highlights the way in which the inequity that permeates society distills itself in different schools.

Lastly, Douglas and Kathryn were worried that these social inequities would segregate students from different home lives and experiences in a public school like Belle Valley. This type of inequity is apparent when looking at the educational outcomes of schools that serve primarily higher socioeconomic status students compared to lower (Cooper, 2005; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). In wanting a diverse student population at any school they sent Campbell too, Douglas and Kathryn were also worried that this type of segregation would be present within schools that serve more diverse populations. They voiced their concern that “Belle Valley would be that private school within a public school, with the honors and there would be this grand distinction between the two.” While they were pleasantly surprised and comforted to find out that Campbell’s experience at Belle Valley was quite the opposite of this, their worry alone again points to the concern of parents that public schools contain the same kind of social stratification present in society at large.

Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems. In the final section of findings, I detail how parents perceived a difficulty with and tensions within participating in various school choice systems. This section is comprised of four themes found across all three interviews: (a) Local school choice works, but larger systemic changes to public education would be better (in which parents describe their perceptions of charters in general), (b)

how the parents agonize over school choice, (c) how privatization adds unnecessary complications and influences to public schools, negatively affecting their purpose, and (d) how school choice is about more than just picking a school.

School choice is about more than just picking a school. One of the tensions mentioned by all of the participants was that they found it difficult to actively participate or entertain the notion of participating in school choice. For each participant, there was a strong desire to send their child(ren) to a public school. Although that might not have been the most immediate outcome for each set of parents, it was the inevitable one.

Each of the participants also described two distinct aspects in choosing a public school, their political beliefs coupled with their personal lives and experiences. For Douglas and Kathryn, this took the form of a broad political choice. Kathryn stated that choosing a school for her sons and choosing to enroll them in a public school is, “a private choice and it’s a personal family choice and it’s as political a choice as you’ll ever make for your child because it’s a public statement of your values, essentially.” She followed this up by saying, “where you are going to send your kids to school is a very political choice and it’s simultaneously extraordinarily personal. And it’s hard.” So not only was Kathryn struggling with the process of choosing a school, for her it was an infusion of a personal decision and a reflection of her political beliefs. Interestingly, she also noted that this is a decision she is making for her children, in a way infusing her children with her own political ideology.

This decision is not simply one of choosing this school over that, but of having that decision reflect the type of society she wants for herself and for her children. Douglas echoed this thought by noting his own difficulty with balancing his political beliefs with choosing a school. He described how,

Until the time came to put our kids in a kindergarten, I was as rabidly public school as you could possibly be and still am and still believe that. But it did make me realize the personal does infuse that political view because it is all fine and good until you have the kid you have to put in school.

Douglas described a further complication to this choice by noting that this decision-making is also not simply about following your own personal beliefs and political compass, but that there is an intermingling between your political and personal lives that becomes inseparable and complicated. The reality of sending his child to a public school (this being Holly Elementary, the school they were unhappy with), was a decision he wanted to make politically, but was not necessarily the best personal choice for his son's education.

While Elaine, David and Diane did not discuss this in the same political terms, their decision-making was affected on a more personal social level. For David and Diane it was looking towards the decisions that the parents of James's classmates were making as an indication of what might be okay. They noted that, "a few other children that left Montessori that came to [Goldtown Elementary] and they really liked it." Parents that they knew from James's first school already having made the decision that they were considering helped confirm that they were making a good choice for their own son. For Elaine, the social influences actually steered her away from choosing or even considering Crystal Charter. In her social networks "when [she] talked to other parents, either their kids are in a Catholic school or one of the big private schools or one of the public schools." Because these were the schools the parents around her were choosing, it encouraged her to look at the same schools.

Elaine also told an interesting story of a family member's experiences in choosing a charter out of state, which highlighted for her the ways in which one's social circles deem some

schools more socially acceptable than others. Similar to Douglas and Kathryn, as well as David and Diane, Elaine's sister found her locally zoned public school unacceptable. Consequently, she chose to send her children to a nearby charter. Elaine was surprised then when

She got a lot of backlash because she chose to put her kids in a different system. And I'm sure if she would have chose to put them in Catholic school or something like that, nobody would have said anything like, "you're just supporting the Catholic Church," you know? You know what I mean?

For Elaine, this highlighted how depending on one's social circles and neighborhood, participating in some kinds of school choice are permissible and unquestioned (including Elaine's own form of school choice – relocation), whereas other forms, such as her sister choosing a charter school, might have incurred criticism.

All of the parents also talked extensively about wanting the school their children attended to be a reflection of the neighborhood they live in. First, this took the obvious form of having a geographic proximity and similarity. When Elaine and her family were choosing a school and neighborhood to live in, she specifically mentioned "just the location" and that things like the pediatrician's office and other commonly travelled to spots would need to be centrally located. Douglas and Kathryn discussed the seemingly haphazard neighborhood zoning lines that complicate their decision on schools. Kathryn described how she "personally struggled, and I know a lot of people in this neighborhood struggle as well, that it doesn't make sense to, well the idea of a neighborhood school, this neighborhood is divided in a really haphazard way." The fact that the zoning boundaries did not match their neighborhood made it more likely for them to need to consider Crystal Charter in the first place. If they were zoned for Belle Valley in the first

place, they would not have had to make a decision on Holly Elementary's quality and then choose Crystal charter in the first place.

Having to make these decisions made Kathryn feel as if Campbell was somewhat outside of the neighborhood because he was not participating in the same way as their literal neighbors. Kathryn described how

Our next door neighbors, or across the street neighbors have a child Campbell's age who started kindergarten at Belle Valley the same year Campbell started at Crystal Charter, and it did, it kind of, well not broke my heart, but like, to see that neighbor and our other neighbor who we run in to all the time at the same school with their kids.

Seeing how all of the other neighbor kids were waiting together and getting on the same bus became an emotional issue that was difficult for Kathryn to deal with, including keeping Campbell at Crystal Charter.

For David and Diane, their sense of neighborhood did not just mean their literal neighborhood per se, but where they spend the most time in Goldtown outside of their home. For Diane, they choose Goldtown Elementary because

We wanted to be at this school because we are in this community most of the time. We utilize the mountain bike trails, these establishments. We are downtown a lot so we are always coming through here, so this felt like the area that we actually are closer and more linked to than where we live.

Even though there are schools that are geographically closer to their home, Goldtown Elementary is nearby, but closer to the part of town where they feel like they are close to. This made them want to choose that specific school. This also kept them from considering a charter. With Crystal Charter being in a completely different part of Goldtown, they were concerned that

there would be a disconnect between their sense of neighborhood and James' school. David noted their desire for a "sense of community within a learning institution" and that with "charter schools and the fact that you have people coming from different communities" he wondered if it was possible to "really get that same feeling."

This sense of community became one of the things David and Diane enjoyed so much about Goldtown Elementary. When meeting with the principal, Diane described how they "told her about how we were involved in the community" and that the principal felt a reciprocal feeling towards them "and her thought is that these [David and Diane] are community minded folks right here, so yes, they need to be here."

David's abstract thought was realized in Douglas and Kathryn's process of school choice, though. Kathryn noted that while Campbell "doesn't really care," they did "care about, sadly, and I'm not proud of this, but it matters to me to be able to at least go to school events and know some of the other parents." Because Crystal Charter was not connected to or firmly rooted in a definite neighborhood, she and Douglas lacked a similar connection to other parents like they had with the families in their neighborhood, that they were not able to form during Campbell's year at Crystal Charter.

Elaine felt a similarly strong desire for her school to be an extension and reflection of the neighborhood they lived in. She stated that she "knew I wanted to live in a neighborhood where the kids knew each other. That they went to school together. That they would eventually ride the bus together, whether later on in elementary school or through middle school." For Elaine, just like the other participants, school was not just about academics or activities, or test scores, it was about the school and the students being an extension of the neighborhood and the parents and children that live there.

For Douglas and Kathryn, while they shared the same feelings on school and neighborhood as Elaine, David and Diane, the feeling came as a bit of a surprise and something they did not anticipate missing by sending Campbell to Crystal Charter. Kathryn described how when Campbell began kindergarten that, she, “didn’t really know what to expect and I was personally surprised by how much I missed having that neighborhood component to our child’s education.”

Local school choice works, but larger systemic changes to public education would be better. All of the parents interviewed described an unwillingness to make many broad declarations about charters being either good or bad. For all of them, the educational needs of specific communities and what a charter might accomplish for them was more important than their political beliefs about the importance of public schools. Elaine stated that “if there was a need for one in the neighborhood and parents were liking it and it was a sustainable model and they were supportive and honest. Then, yeah. That is fine.” Douglas similarly stated that personally, he did not, “want to come across, me personally, as someone who is pro or anti charter school. I think it depends on the community.” David also noted that charters, “open up opportunity in some cases. So I don’t really have a problem with them” before describing himself as being, “neutral” on the issue. In each of these instances, Elaine, Douglas, and David all do not want to vociferously declare their support for charters on a nationwide scale or offer a politically charged opinion either way. Instead, it is about what an individual community needs and what a specific charter or charters can do for that specific community.

Being more aware of Crystal Charter than my other participants, Douglas and Kathryn described how they were more okay with sending Campbell there because they knew and trusted

the local organization that runs it. While they did not have a strong connection to the local organization that governs Crystal Charter, it was a known entity to them. Kathryn noted this

as a unique thing about Crystal Charter is that their schools is and was created by a local organization, so it was run by people we know. We don't know them personally, but they are very well-known community leaders with a very long running track record of good work.

This locally proven track record made Douglas and Kathryn comfortable considering it as an option despite their previously mentioned skepticism over charters in general and strong support for public schools.

Like many of their other considerations, though, this decision and concept was not without tension. Despite trusting Crystal Charter itself and taking advantage of the opportunity to send Campbell there, Douglas was quite reticent to state that charters are a viable option on the national level. Douglas said that on, "a micro-level we were just fine with Crystal Charter. It was a well-run school with good intentions. But on a broader level I'm not so sure based on the things I've read and heard that charter schools are really the way to go." Douglas and Kathryn felt comfortable with Crystal Charter as a singular entity because it was known, local, and trusted, but this was not something they could say about the charter system as a whole.

David had a similar thought when discussing voucher programs. With James attending a private Montessori school before transferring to a public school, David and Diane noted that on a personal level that they would not have turned down the opportunity to receive a voucher to help them pay for the tuition. David stated that, "a voucher option would have been nice since it would have reduced our financial burden when it comes to education, but when I step back and look at it, the big picture, I don't know that it would always be positive." Interestingly, even

though they personally would have benefitted from a voucher system that would have reduced the amount of money they paid out of pocket, David noted this personal benefit would not outweigh the strain a voucher system would put on the education system as a whole.

While this dissertation is focusing more on charter schools, as voucher programs are not currently legal in Tennessee at the time of its writing, the logic can apply easily when discussing vouchers or charters. This is exemplified in the way Elaine described the notion of market-based economic theory on education, a cornerstone of any kind of school choice. Elaine stated that she was “very hesitant to say that nation-wide we need more competition, because I am such a public school advocate, but I also understand that different people have different needs for their children’s education or their own.” Following along with the pattern noted above, Elaine agreed that public schools are best, large scale school choice is not the way to improve education, but that decision making at the individual level is for that specific family to make, even if it might in some ways contradict their personal or political feelings about education.

Parents agonize over school choice. The complexity described above begins to highlight the difficulty all of the parents interviewed described throughout their decision-making process. Because Douglas and Kathryn felt like they could not send Campbell to Holly Elementary and feel positively about that decision, they had to begin the difficult school choice process. The complexity of this decision is shown through Kathryn’s description of her thoughts while she weighed one decision over another:

I can speak for myself it was a very fraught decision and it had to do with what I believe is right for me personally, morally, what is comfortable for me, also what is good for our child academically and socially and morally. So it was a really hard choice.

Kathryn's decision was moral, academic, and personal all at the same time. Having to go against her desire to send Campbell to a public school and also send him to a school that lacked the neighborhood connection she desired was complex and difficult.

David and Diane also had difficulty in journey to find a suitable school for James. First, "neither one of [them] really felt a good vibe or connection" at the school they were zoned for. While they were happy enough keeping James at the Montessori school, after finding a public school they were happy enough sending him to, they were unable to make the transfer happen. Despite the fact that "it was actually more convenient for [them]" and that "it made more sense to [them] to try and go there," the system did not provide that opportunity, which resulted in two different rejections. So even after making a decision they were happy and comfortable with, they were forced into a position that required them to consider their options yet again.

This decision was even difficult for Elaine, who arguably employed the most well-known and simplest form of school choice. Elaine stated that, "I chose not to go live in a neighborhood, even if I wanted to live in that neighborhood, if I knew the school wasn't as good." Even if Elaine wanted to live in certain areas of Goldtown, the lack of a school she felt comfortable sending her daughter to precluded her from being able to live where she might have wanted.

Kathryn summed up the complexity and difficulty of being in this situation of having to consider what school or schools are appropriate for their child by laying out her own decision-making process. She described how she "agonized about it for the year before Kindergarten. And then I agonized all through kindergarten about if this (Crystal Charter) was the right place. Should we move him? Should we not move him?" This process was difficulty while trying to find a school they felt comfortable enough sending him to but, for the reasons discussed

throughout this chapter, this agony did not end simply because they made one decision to send Campbell to one school.

Even after finally reaching a decision they were comfortable with, Douglas and Kathryn as well as David and Diane knew that this process will happen again in their near future. By transferring to a different school, whether public or private, the mere fact that these schools only teach students up to a certain grade means that this decision will need to be revisited for middle and high schools. Despite thinking about this for years already, Kathryn noted that “in a year and a half when we’ll have to figure out what we’re going to do about middle school. And we’ll have this whole conversation all over again. And I don’t know what we’re going to do.” Diane also felt this by describing how she worried about James “moving to the middle school and then ultimately do I want him to go to the high school that he is zoned for here.” Once entering into the school choice system, it is a decision and process that will most likely need to be revisited multiple times throughout a students’ K-12 education.

Privatization adds unnecessary complications and influences to public schools, negatively affecting their purpose. My participants also noted that they have strong concerns over the effects of privatization on public education. With each parent noting a strong desire for their children to receive a public education, they worried about the viability and strength of public schools because of outside influences, despite each of them wrestling with the complexity of choice systems for themselves and of other parents.

In all three interviews, my participants expressed concerns over the potential ulterior motives or agendas of private organizations opening and running schools through schools, such as the charter management organizations that operate charter schools. Primarily, this took the form of businesses or private organizations attempting to profit off of schools or education and

not having children and their education as their sole concern and motivation. When asked about the influence of the private sector on education, Elaine noted that it, “just seems a little problematic.” She continued by describing her thoughts on public education and her, “Utopian idea of public schools are great. It is free education. It is for the betterment of society.”

This public focus on education for the betterment at all is directly contrary to her worries about involving business in education. She continued:

I think that when you get sort of a company involved, I don't want to be pushed into an agenda where there is maybe not as many checks and balances. State and county, state and federal government. And it just seems like private enterprise, like that partnering with the public schools just ... I don't know. My perception is that that's a little tricky to me. Just because I don't want to then pay into a private company's profits. Or have to buy what they're selling because they're co-owners of the school.

For Elaine, a school has a singular and focused goal: educate children to improve society. By intermingling private enterprise in this public system, other motivations and factors would inherently follow. Businesses need to make a profit; business fight for deregulation. Through merely involving businesses in education, it inherently shifts the focus away from the singular goal of educating children.

David shared this concern as well, declaring his dislike for privatizing public services. He shared his belief that, “public is for the public and it should be for everybody and anytime you start ... anytime someone starts to profit so to speak from something like that, you're going to run into problems.” For David, privatizing public services complicates the focus and ability of public services in the same way that Elaine described – it shifts the focus. This same concern was expressed by Douglas and attached directly to charter schools. He told how he has, “read

horror stories about these for-profit charter schools or these charter schools that basically sell a community a bill of goods and the education is atrocious, and the kids are not the priority.” As in the other two interviews, adding profit and privatization shifts or complicates the goal, can reduce quality and simply removes educating children and students from being the purpose of the organization, something that none of the participants worried about with public schools.

Privatization also created a concern for the influence of religion on public education, as described in the interviews with Douglas and Kathryn and with David and Diane. Before they made the decision to send Campbell to Crystal Charter, Douglas and Kathryn were worried about the potential for the charter’s religious parent organization to have an effect on the school. They were pleasantly surprised, however, that while, “Crystal Foundation is clearly a religious organization and Crystal Charter is an adamantly non-religious. And that was an issue for me as we were making our decision. I was really pleased that it was not a religious school.” While they were pleased there was no undue influence from the religious organization on the secular school it runs, it was still a major concern for Douglas and Kathryn.

While not citing as concrete of an example, David also expressed concern about the influence that privatization would allow private religious organizations to have on education. He stated that while “politics are always going to have a role in education no matter what” but that, “just being in the South you start to get into religious aspects as well, so you get politics and religion now having an influence on the education system, and it is not always positive.”

Douglas and Kathryn took these concerns about privatization one step further and expressed a worry that privatization was the method to outright “demolish the public school system.” Kathryn expressed her concerns that legislation to allow private influence on public education would “dismantle the public school system” and Douglas described how to him, “it

does seem like there is a systematic effort to, if not demolish the public school system, to strictly inhibit its infrastructure.” Specifically referencing the current Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, Douglas stated that, “it seems that there is a push from large portions of people in this country to just defund public schools all together and make it that you get the education that you pay for. And that to me just seems un-American.” Similar to Elaine’s above comment about the connection between strong public education and a Utopian society, Douglas directly connects strong public schools with America itself, and efforts to privatize and monetize education as going decidedly against that.

Lastly, my participants conveyed doubts as to the efficacy of the influence of privatization on our education system. When asked about their thoughts on school choice improving education overall through competition, Douglas did not associate the successes of Crystal Charter with any increase in the quality of Goldtown schools. He expressed doubts that the charter’s success “corresponds to the whole school system as a whole feeling pressure to change the way they’re doing, or to be more competitive with Crystal Charter.” Kathryn agreed noting she does not believe that the public school principal of Belle Valley

is like, oh, things are going great at Crystal Charter, so we better up our game. I don’t think that is what is motivating her to run a really great school. What motivates her is that she loves the kids and is a believer in schools.

For both Douglas and Kathryn, there is no reason to believe that competition and free market economic theory (both key tenants of the school choice movement) have any real effect on the quality of education provided by the local public schools theoretically competing with Crystal Charter.

David shared a similar thought and used the example of school transportation to express his dislike about encouraging competition between schools. He noted that he does not

like to see competition in that way, because what you start to end up with are the people who maybe don't have a transportation option to go from here to this other school, so they have to stay here. But now all of the other teachers have gone to the other school, so they're at a disadvantage for one reason or another. For whatever reason, they can't get to that other school transportation-wise. And even if you can provide public transportation you start looking at sticking a student in a ten hour day between a bus ride from school to school and trying to get home. You run into issues.

Though this just served as an example as to why David dislikes the notion of competition in public education, his example illustrates the way in which fostering competition for public services exacerbates a system of inequity. In David's example, the presumed benefit of competition creates a system in which some students are left behind for reasons outside of their control. So rather than addressing and solving the inequity already existing in public education, in David's view it simply shifts it around.

For Elaine, her doubts about the efficacy of privatization seems to be deeply rooted in her experience with the failure of the charter schools in her hometown in Ohio. She shared that

there was a lot of discussion about charter schools and I just remember they would open up and then close down. And there was a lawsuit or whatever. Or the city was shutting things down. It just seemed like that was my point of reference, so that point of reference wasn't a positive one.

In Elaine's experience growing up, albeit in a different generation than the time her children are currently being educated during, charter schools were unstable and would open and close and be

subjected to lawsuits due to mismanagement. So, although her doubts are not tied to the theoretical basis of privatization like Douglas and Kathryn's, in her experience it was more with the quality of charter schools overall. In each of the interviews, though, my participants described a belief that competition and privatization do not help solve any problems, but instead create new ones while public schools are still left with the task of educating children.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented findings for this qualitative case study in two ways. First, I recounted narratives developed from how parents shared their stories of navigating school choice and the way they perceived local public and charter schools in the attempt to find a school for their child that they were happy and comfortable with. Second, I presented the major themes found across all three interviews, looking at what parents want out of public schools, their desire for better public schools, and the difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems. Implications drawn from these findings, as well as the ways in which these findings address the research questions, are detailed in chapter five by centering these findings in the context of the established literature and my chosen theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

As outlined in the first two chapters, neoliberalism is a systemic effort to shift the focus of government to be rooted in free market economic theory rather than the betterment of all student through social service. In a now oft-cited and highly politicized quotation from 2015, several years before her appointment, current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos called public education “a closed system, a closed industry, a closed market. It’s a monopoly, a dead end.” Although she has since walked back and tried to recontextualize those words, they nonetheless provide a contrary point to what my participants shared regarding their faith in, and a strong desire for, a robust and equitable public education system.

In the introduction to this dissertation I chronicled a bit of my personal experience working at a charter school and how it felt like it skirted the intentions, purposes, and responsibilities of public schools. In chapter three, however, I described how I did not wish for this dissertation to be a personal, critical examination of charter schools and school choice, but rather a long look into how my participants perceived both public and charter schools, as well as the way neoliberal language and rhetoric has manifested in the way they talk about education. Note: all interview quotes presented in this chapter are from the participant interviews conducted during data analysis.

Discussion of Findings

Given this, the discussion of my findings will be focused firmly in the beginning chapters of this dissertation. I first discuss my findings directly in terms of my research questions. I then present my findings in terms of my additions to the previously established literature in chapter two, as well as how my project’s findings are limited and do not address certain aspects of the

literature review. Lastly, I will situate my findings in my theoretical framework, understanding them on a broader scale.

Research Questions. The first way in which I discuss my findings is through addressing them directly in terms of my three research questions.

How might neoliberal political discourse manifest in the perceptions parents/guardians have of charter schools compared to local neighborhood schools? Despite the fact that each of my participants lived in an area targeted by Crystal Charter for advertisement and enrollment, only one family had much knowledge about it, Douglas and Kathryn, who sent Campbell there for one year. Overall, then, the parents in my student largely were not interested in entertaining the notion of a charter school as a viable option for their children's education. Though the ways differed between families, each family was on a path that would lead them to a public school that they deemed suitable for their children. For each participant, the way they described this path towards a public school was rooted in one of the foundations of neoliberalism – choice (Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Harvey, 2007; Martinez & Garcia, 1998).

However, despite their concepts of schools being rooted in the discourse of neoliberalism, their aims were quite contrary to it. Each parent held high estimations of public education overall and worked diligently to find a public school for their children. The parents were not making decisions solely through a market-based ideology, but according to firmly held beliefs in public schools that position them as an invaluable public service. This was not a blind, unquestioning held belief in an institution, though, as each parent did not look at each public school as inherently equal. These perceptions of public schools are described in further detail later in this chapter, but my participants did make a choice to send their students to the public school they felt would be the best fit for their children.

In a sense, then, parents were participating in a choice system, but not out of unwavering faith that the market would provide the best decision. In fact, my participants worried about the larger implications of privatization and neoliberalism despite recognizing they may benefit from it personally. Each of the parents in this study believed that private organizations and for-profit industry should not be allowed to govern education for fear of children getting lost amidst motivations of money or ideology. Even the way in which Crystal Charter failed to effectively market to most of my participants spoke to the overall failure of neoliberal ideology to manifest itself in my participants' evaluations of education. If, as neoliberals argue, charter schools are inherently better at educating due to the reduced regulation and bureaucracy, and the supposed benefits of the free market (Campi, 2018; Friedman, 1955; 1995; Logan, 2018), then my participants *should* have looked at Crystal Charter as one of the premier schools in Goldtown. Instead, my participants either failed to hear much about it, or made the choice to remove their child from there after a single year.

Instead, when discussing the issues they had with some public schools struggling to live up to their expectations, my participants refrained from any of the traditional neoliberal arguments about the failure of public education. They did not talk about too much money in the system, schools desperately needing freed from bureaucracy, or the overpaid and lazy public school teacher as the inevitable outcome of a publicly funded education system (Campi, 2018; Stitzlein, 2013). Instead, the parents in my study wanted increased funding and more attention on individual schools and school systems alike to improve a public school system that they each firmly believe in and want their children to participate in. But again, my participants did all make choices to not send their children to certain public schools as they perceived them as failing or lacking in some way. However, my participants looked at these schools as places of opportunity

and needing more help so that everyone, their children and others, could have a neighborhood public school of the highest quality. It was the public schools they wanted improved by genuinely improving them, not by creating neoliberal alternatives.

Lastly, the parents in this study did note some amount of worry about bureaucracy in public education, but not nearly to the level neoliberal arguments state. Douglas, Kathryn, Diane, and Elaine did want more openness and innovation in public schools, which is a common neoliberal critique (Campi, 2018; Friedman, 1995; Logan, 2018), but their suggestion was not to deregulate or privatize, but instead put more faith in teachers and local schools, as they are people and organizations to be trusted. Rather than bureaucracy being an issue solely due to schools being government run public institutions, David worried about the politicization and privatization of public education and how this increases bureaucracy. He worried about the added bureaucracy if private interests complicated public schools, rather than the being the solution to bureaucracy.

What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local neighborhood schools? With school districts in Tennessee largely organized at the county level, parental perceptions of the local schools are complicated due to the wide variability within Gold County. The parents' perceptions of local schools differed dramatically from school to school. While as an overall institution my participants looked highly on public schools, but individual schools themselves were evaluated much more on a case by case basis. The schools that the participants perceived highly were safe and consistent, matching the neighborhoods in which they chose to live and spend their time in. They wanted schools that were a seamless extension of those neighborhoods. Additionally, they wanted schools that authentically represented society at large, being a mix of different kinds of people from various walks of life, educating students across

racial and socioeconomic lines. In this regard, my participants all negatively perceived public schools that disproportionately served one particular demographic, whether it matched their own or not.

Another way in which the parents perceived the schools was in terms of a well-rounded curriculum. The schools they valued had staff who held high expectations for their students, but did not rely on homework, and allowed time for the students to be children and participate in family and social lives outside of school. They also had a variety of experiences available to the students, both in and outside of school, including the arts and physical activities. The schools also did not overly estimate the importance of testing. While the parents all acknowledged the reality that we live in a world where standardized testing exists, they did not want that to be a focal point of the education. Conversely, the schools the parents perceived as unacceptable for their children all failed in at least some, if not all of these aspects. On a happy note, however, through the various processes that the parents settled on public schools for their children, they all expressed contentment with their current public schools.

What perceptions do parents/guardians have of the local charter school? The largest take away from this study is that in one way or another, all of my participants did not seriously consider Crystal Charter as a viable option for their children. While Douglas and Kathryn were the exception, in that Campbell spent a year there before transferring to Belle Valley, the other parents were not incredibly familiar with Crystal Charter from the outset. Elaine wanted her children to attend a quality public school from the beginning, so she relocated to a school zone where she felt she could make that happen. David and Diane on the other hand were not happy at the prospect of sending James to Adena Elementary, and were content to keep him at the private school where he attended preschool until they could accomplish a public school transfer they

were happy with. For both of these families, attending a public school was the goal from the outset, so making a knowingly temporary decision admittedly did not make sense. Additionally, with their perceptions of privatization and charter schools in general, it also made sense for these parents to not seriously consider Crystal Charter as a viable option.

Consequently, the perceptions discussed below are those of Douglas and Kathryn. First, one of the key reasons why Douglas and Kathryn were even considering sending Campbell to a charter school given their strong, political affinity to support public schools was that Crystal Charter is governed by a local organization. While Douglas and Kathryn were not comfortable with many of the larger philosophical and economic motivations associated with the charter school movement, like privatization and free market competition amongst schools, a local non-profit did not seem quite like the large private charter management organizations running many of the charter school conglomerates that Douglas and Kathryn were critical of. This being said, both repeatedly described how they wished there was no need for charter schools or a choice in general, and that their locally-zoned public school was a place they felt comfortable sending their sons.

While Douglas and Kathryn were originally happy having this choice after Campbell was waitlisted at Belle Valley, the environment at Crystal Charter soon proved to not be quite what they were hoping for. Douglas and Kathryn wanted out of Crystal Charter what they wanted out of a public school they would be happy with, like Belle Valley. They wanted a consistent and safe, authentically diverse school that provided a quality education. While Douglas and Kathryn were happy with many of the academic aspects of Crystal Charter, apart from the extensive homework assigned, the school was less authentically diverse than they wanted for Campbell. Additionally, the classroom environment was more reminiscent to the classroom environment

they wanted to keep Campbell out of at Holly Elementary. There was extensive student and teacher turnover, the classroom environment was more tumultuous than they anticipated due to the difficulties many of the students faced and consequently the staff employed a rigid disciplinary system.

While neither Douglas nor Kathryn outright stated this, in many ways their perceptions of Crystal Charter were very similar to their descriptions of Holly Elementary. Douglas and Kathryn seemed thankful that they had the opportunity to send Campbell there, even noting that Campbell quite enjoyed the school, but the decision to send Campbell to Belle Valley alone points to the reality that they did not perceive Crystal Charter as the school they really wanted Campbell to attend.

What perceptions do parents/guardians have of charter schools in general? In general, my participants had much more to say about charters than they specifically did about Crystal Charter. Overall, as stated above, my participants described an intense support and positive perception of public schools, which they did not consider charter schools to be. Their major concerns with charter schools was the fear of privatization and unknown organizations or businesses running schools. As stated in the first section of this chapter, this stems from a concern that organizations and companies outside of the traditional public sphere will not fully devote their efforts and resources to educating their students.

One of the concerns overall with charter schools is the difficulty parents had participating in choice systems. Kathryn described the process of choosing schools as agony. For everyone but Elaine, the process of getting their children into a public school they were happy with took years, multiple decisions and types of schools, all while facing rejections and wait lists. Each of these moves caused concern over what new school reality their children would be dealing with.

New teachers, new policies, even new material and academic standards. Even with Elaine moving to a neighborhood so her children could attend a school like Mountain View resulted in Elaine having to restrict the neighborhoods she could seriously consider.

One thing that each of the participants also addressed was that despite the difficulty and agony, they were ultimately able to successfully navigate these systems. Elaine and her family had the resources to choose the neighborhood that would allow her children to attend a public school she wanted. David and Diane were able to afford a private school while they dealt with transfers, something that Douglas and Kathryn also acknowledged they would be able to do if needed. In their own ways, they were able to weather these situations until their children were enrolled in the public schools they wanted so that they did not have to choose between a poorly perceived public school and the only other public option, a charter school.

Ultimately, the way in which these parents talked about this process of choosing schools was one of an unnecessary complication to education. They wanted public schools and a public education. They did not want to have to worry about transfers, charters, or good schools and struggling schools. Their worries and concerns and stress would not need to exist if a more focused and concerted effort was made to strengthen all of the public schools, rather than institute neoliberal reforms that provide choice and hope that these reforms provide overall better educational outcomes. For these parents, making a choice was something they wished they did not have to do, and would not have to do if each public school was improved to be of the same high quality.

Literature Review. In this section I discuss the ways in which my findings can be more broadly contextualized within the literature review in chapter two. I discuss how my findings

support, add to, or even in some cases contradict the existing literature, marking out my own place in this ongoing discourse.

Tennessee Charter School Legislation. As described in chapter two of this dissertation, Tennessee has maintained fairly strict laws over the past two decades on the quantity and types of charter schools permitted in the state. Additionally, the existing legislation allows local school boards to be the authorizing agency of charter schools (Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002). One of the consequences of these components to the legislation has resulted in a huge disparity between the number of charters in Central and Western Tennessee when compared to Eastern Tennessee.

With this in mind, it is not a huge surprise that three of the five parents participating in the study had little opinion of or contact with Crystal Charter, despite being in the school zones that Crystal Charter specifically targets and advertises to. With Douglas and Kathryn however, one aspect of charter authorization that they were pleasantly surprised by was the lack of influence of Crystal Charter's religious parent organization on the charter school itself. It should be noted, though, that Douglas, Kathryn, and David all went on to express concerns that private religious beliefs would wind up having a stronger influence on education as a whole.

Another part of the existing charter legislation (Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002) is the emphasis to desegregate charters in Tennessee. When Douglas and Kathryn talked about their experience at Crystal Charter, one of their main complaints was a lack of authentic diversity, with the school being disproportionately Black/African American and from a low-socioeconomic background. This supports the existing literature that criticizes both state and federal initiatives to meaningfully increase racial and economic diversity in schools through the establishment of charters.

Failed Tennessee Charter School Legislation and Private Sector Influences on Charter Schools and School Choice. These two sections of the literature review are combined in this section because much of the failed Tennessee legislation detailed in my literature review deals with the influence of the private sector on education. One of the repeatedly failed pieces of charter school legislature in Tennessee is the expansion of charters to be run by for-profit companies and organizations (Boucher, 2015; Garrison, 2014; Tennessee General Assembly, 2014; Zubrzycki, 2014). While at the time of this dissertation's writing this is still banned by Tennessee law, it was something that the parents all expressed concern over. This concern took two main forms.

First, there was a general concern of outside organizations coming in and starting schools. The participants, specifically Douglas and Kathryn who seriously considered a charter school viable enough to send their son there, felt more comfortable with a non-public school if the organization governing it was local, already known amongst the community, and had a proven track record of success. This helps support the existing literature that details the criticism in many communities of large, unknown, outside organizations coming in and making broad changes to the educational landscape of specific school districts (Diem et al, 2015).

This parallels my participants' second concern, in that they question for-profit and private motivations with private businesses and organizations governing schools. Each of the participants noted a distrust of the intermingling of private industry with public institutions. With these organizations inherently existing outside of the typical public sector, my participants expressed concerns over what other influences would affect their decision making, things like profits and political or religious agendas. It is noteworthy that when asked, the participants did not express any concern over this in the existing public school districts. While each interview

contained some amount of acknowledgment that there will inevitably be individual egos or motivations in any organization, including public ones, any large scale, broad ulterior motivations were only a concern for the prospect of schools governed outside of the public sphere.

Additionally, David and Diane interestingly noted that while vouchers would have been personally beneficial to them for the several years they sent their son James to a private Montessori school, they did not think this outweighed the potential problems vouchers would cause the state as a whole. With the political push for voucher legislation lurking in the state legislatures for the past six years and its recent resurgence by Governor Lee, it is interesting that even a family who would have personally benefited from a voucher program finds this type of school choice suspect. Instead, David and Diane specifically noted that rather than public money being put towards school choice models like charters and vouchers, they would prefer more money returned to the public school system so that more students could be better educated through that existing system.

One aspect of the public education system that each of the participants brought up was the private fundraising carried out by the parent teacher organizations that work in conjunction with many of the public schools in Goldtown. For each of the participants, there were varying degrees of worry about the appropriate levels of funding of private schools overall, in the state, and in Goldtown Schools itself. For David and Kathryn, as well as David and Diane, they were worried about the inequitable amount of money these PTO organizations raise for one school compared to others. David specifically pointed out that many of the schools with the least active PTO fundraising were some of the schools that need additional funding the most. Elaine was more concerned about the additional burden this put on families attending her school, especially

the families who were not quite as financially well off as others. It is of interest then, that the families noted a distrust of the influence of the private sector on education, and also wanted the schools better funded overall from the beginning, rather than ad hoc measures to supplement education funding when the initial public funding is insufficient from the start.

School Accountability Metrics in Tennessee. Like many in education itself (Hatch, 2015; Ravitch, 2016; Renee & Trujillo, 2014), the parents all denoted an overall distrust in standardized testing. While they all noted that some amount of testing is appropriate just to make sure that schools are meeting the standards expected of them by the government and that students are learning, too much is seen as problematic. For instance, teaching to those specific tests was seen as problematic, as well as tying funding to how well schools perform overall on tests.

With the specific, prescribed curricula that oftentimes accompanies standardized testing, the participants all wanted schools to have more curricular freedom – whether it was experimenting with innovation like Elaine wants, or public schools being open to alternative models, like Diane would prefer. In this distrust of standardized testing, namely over-testing, Elaine even went so far as to state she would purposefully avoid sending her children to a school that overly emphasizes test preparation, even if it results in high overall test scores. This distrust of testing was also indicative of how my participants perceived school quality.

Parental Perceptions of School Quality. Contrary to much of the existing literature cited in chapter two (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016; Beabout & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016), my participants did not cite many of the traditional perceptions of school quality as determining factors in evaluating their local public schools. As mentioned above, the parents did not cite school testing data, graduation rates, or other state-level data as

main contributors to their perceptions of school quality. When discussing teachers, the parents instead referenced specific instances where teachers and staff held high academic expectations for their children. For instance, the teacher David and Diane encountered at Adena Elementary held lower academic expectations for James evidenced by her surprise at him recognizing certain shapes. Counter to that was their experience at Goldtown Elementary where teachers and an administrator were excited to see how James could thrive at their school.

Similarly to this was my participants' evaluation of teachers and schools who were more focused on assigning homework. Kathryn and Douglas were skeptical of the efficacy of the large amounts of homework assigned at Crystal Charter, while they were happy with Campbell not having homework at Belle Valley until he reached third grade. To bolster their opinion, neither noticed a decline in Campbell's academic growth going from Crystal Charter to Belle Valley, despite the dramatic difference in homework philosophies.

Elaine, David and Diane all shared similar perspectives. Elaine, for instance, compared Veronica's teachers to others teaching first grade at Mountain View, noting that she was happier without having the daily, traditional homework. David and Diane also were pleased that the move from a private school to James's public school did not come at the cost of hours of homework each night. Again, with no perceived decline in the quality of education or academic growth in moving schools, the perception of the quality of their children's teachers was tied to strong teaching during the school day along with a lack of homework, rather than the professed rigor of extensive homework that was part of Crystal Charter's philosophy.

Unlike much of the synthesized research, my participants noted a high estimation of public schools. Each participant noted that they valued and enjoyed their time spent attending public schools, attaching broad feelings of the importance of a public education like civic

participation and community involvement. However, many economically and racially marginalized parents participating in school choice do not share that high evaluation of public schools as a whole (Beabout, & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Cooper, 2005; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). While these studies noted that these feelings of a failed public education system are deeply rooted in forced attendance in poorly performing schools, this was not something experienced by any of my participants, whether attending large, well-funded suburban schools, or smaller, poorly-funded rural schools.

While the literature suggested that affluent, white parents have a more traditional attachment to place and that minority parents often extend that conception beyond strictly meaning geography, my participants exhibited a desire to have both (Beabout, & Cambre, 2013; Bell, 2007; Cooper, 2005). All of the participants wanted a school that was close to things like their work, home, or frequently visited places like a pediatrician, but they also had a broader sense of space they were trying to attain. For instance, they all noted they wanted the schools to have a feeling that connected to their conception of an overall neighborhood feeling. Whether it was the people, the “vibe,” the friends and families they know, or the nearby business they frequent, my participants wanted the schools to match their notion of what their neighborhood is.

Along with the parents described in several pieces of my literature view, my participants all highly valued diversity as a key component to a quality education (Altenhofen, Berends & White, 2016; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Unlike the participants in many of these studies, however, charter schools were not seen as the way for parents to have their children in authentically diverse schools. Additionally, while many parents in the aforementioned studies wound up choosing middle-class, suburban public schools or private schools that are stereotypically very white, all five of the parents interviewed for this

study did not find a school they were happy with for their children until they were in settings that were authentically diverse. These five parents wanted diversity but were not willing to sacrifice it solely for traditional metrics of high quality academics easily obtained by extending their cultural and economic capital. Instead, it was a critical component of why they chose to participate in school choice the way they did, in each case choosing a diverse public school.

One of the limitations of this study is that I did not have any participants who would be considered marginalized along socio-economic or racial demographics. Consequently, I was unable to determine if the parents in my study were successful in navigating various methods of school choice in order for their children to ultimately attend traditional public schools that they perceived as high quality through extending various forms of capital not available to all members of society (Bourdieu, 1968; Roda & Wells, 2013; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). While I suspect that this is likely the case, it is only that, a suspicion.

Theoretical Framework. Throughout my analysis, it became apparent that my participants were not talking about public schools or charter schools outside of the notion of choice. For instance, Elaine described the process of house shopping in her transition to moving to Goldtown. In this discussion Elaine describes it as her “choice of schools.” Additionally, for Douglas and Kathryn as well as David and Diane, it was always an option for them to consider choice mechanics in their efforts to enroll their children at a public school of their preference. This is emblematic of the discourse and framing described by Foucault (1972, 1977) and Lakoff (2004, 2008). When my participants were faced with a locally zoned school that they were unhappy sending their children to, or deemed lacking in some way, the only path forward was one of choice, a path perfectly framed by institutional neoliberal knowledge and messaging. The notion of choosing a school is so embedded for my participants that the logical

progression is to find a way to send their children to another school, whether through the public transfer option or a charter. Despite even explicitly talking about how the privatization of schools could be seen as an effort to dismantle the public education system, and that they all firmly believe in and want their children to participate in public education, the way forward for them was all through the framing and discourse of choice.

While these five parents' navigations of school choice (relocation, charter schools, private schools, and public transfers) were not exclusively done through the systems outlined by Tennessee legislators, these parents are still operating in a system of control that infuses choice mechanics in the larger sphere of public education. As discussed in the latter half of this chapter, however, it was not done through the more standard pathway for Tennesseans participating in school choice of outright rejecting traditional public schools for charter schools.

The political and common discourse surrounding school choice is one of the primacy of charters and free market neoliberal ideology as the way to improve education in the United States (Campi, 2018; Freidman, 1955; 1980; Logan, 2018; Stitzlein, 2013). However, for these parents the goal was to have their children receive a public education, and they worked extremely hard, sometimes for years, in order to accomplish this. This of course does not mean that the parents uncritically looked at each public school as a place they felt comfortable sending their children. These tensions between the educational choice system encouraging charter enrollment and the parents using whatever tools necessary to satisfy the desire for their children to have a public education are also indicative of parents resisting legislative efforts to create a free market school system through governmentality (Foucault, 1991). While the tactics themselves are encouraging parents to enroll students at charter schools (Campi, 2018; Schiller, 2011; Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002), the parents are again working outside of

the imposed systems, in a way using choice mechanisms to keep their kids in public schools rather than remove them.

Interestingly enough, and surprising to me, was that very traditional, numerical factors like graduation rates and test scores, the school quality metrics pushed by government entities and school reformers alike (Hatch, 2015; Ravitch, 2016), were not a focal point for the participants. In fact, when asked about why they picked certain schools or how they felt about the quality of certain schools, the parents described more about how the school felt, the “vibe” of a school, and how they felt after specific interactions with teachers and staff. The common theme of being distrustful of the level of testing in schools, even labeling over-testing as dangerous, was a quality that would cause parents to avoid sending their children to a school. This push back against neoliberal quality controls goes counter to the pervasive anti-public school discourse laid out by Lakoff (2004, 2008) in the positioning of neoliberal thinking as the only way through which to gauge the quality of schools.

These parents resisted notions of free market ideologies and neoliberalism as the sole way to consider school quality. Linking this idea with Foucault’s concept of Governmentality, as described above, the parents interviewed mentioned at several points the problematic nature of privatization in education, as was the case with Douglas and his thoughts regarding a systemic effort to dismantle the public education system. Seemingly, then, the parents had no qualms calling into question the framing that public schools need to be privatized and forced to compete in order to improve education as a whole. Instead, the parents did whatever necessary to ensure that their children wound up receiving a public education, even if this was through the larger framing of choice.

With the unanticipated narrowing of the case to focus exclusively on middle-class, white parents navigating school choice in Goldtown, the initial inclusion of the Politics of Desperation (Stovall, 2013) has not quite guided the study in the way originally thought, yet interestingly enough still applies. The participants in this study are the types of parents the U.S. education system is built for, but they are not participating in it the way the system was designed, again resisting the larger neoliberal forces working to push public education to one of school choice. While these parents are not part of the marginalized populations that Stovall specifically referred to, they are still navigating a school choice system in a moment of “school uncertainty” in which these parents are attempting to find the best possible school for their children to attend (Stovall, 2013, p. 40). What is available to my participants that is not available to the parents Stovall wrote about is a wider array of choices to explore when dissatisfied by the locally-zoned traditional public school.

The parents in my study were able to move into a neighborhood they felt comfortable in, choose charter and private schools if a traditional public school was not readily available for them, and then keep their children in these schools until a transfer to an acceptable traditional public school was possible. While Stovall (2013) described how the charter schools were built more on empty promises for the parents in his study, and parents felt stuck between two types of schools that they felt failed them, the parents in my study had the social and economic capital to prevent this being the situation for their children. I am by no means saying this was not without difficulty, with the parents in my study all describing this process as difficult and requiring sacrifices in order to successfully enroll their children in a public school they were ultimately happy with.

Implications

While I was beginning to try and make sense of all of my findings while analyzing my interviews with these five parents, I quickly began to see that, for my participants, school choice and education are full of tensions. It is full of a tension that they are wrestling with for the sake of their children, but only begrudgingly so because it is what is required of them to participate actively and consciously in order to provide their children with the best education possible.

This dissertation draws its main title from an amazingly insightful quote from Kathryn on how she summarized her experience dealing with making educational decisions for her children.

Kathryn said,

it's a private choice and it's a personal family choice and it's as political a choice as you'll ever make for your child because it's a public statement of your values, essentially. And it's really hard ... where you are going to send your kids to school is a very political choice and it's simultaneously extraordinarily personal. And it's hard.

The difficulty that Kathryn spoke of here is due to the tension that I mention above. Sending her children to school is not the simple act of enrolling them at the school up the road and putting them on a bus that picks them up in front of the neighbor's driveway. It is an active and political choice she is making along with her husband but also on behalf of her children. Because the system also forces political decisions to be made just in order to participate in the ubiquitous system of educational choice, she is forced to balance her desire for a strong public education with the systems of governance placed upon her by those in power.

Foucault (1993) addressed this tension in one of his lectures at Dartmouth College in discussing the influence of neoliberal political governance on the individual and the individual's

forced participation in this system in order to make neoliberal governing work as a whole.

Foucault contended that individuals in this type of system have

to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques – techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself. (pp. 203-204)

Resisting this equilibrium is the tension and difficulty that Kathryn is describing. With the pervasiveness of this tension present throughout my findings, the implications of this study will be rooted in trying to make sense of this tension in two key ways. First, this participation is not one that these parents are happily being part of. Secondly, these parents are participating in school choice, but not in the way commonly outlined by politicians and education reformers.

Middle class white parents wish they did not have to participate in school choice.

More than anything else, what I heard from my participants was that they simply wanted a strong, well-funded, robust public school system that they did not have to worry about sending their children to. Each of my participants had to participate in a system of choice that they simply did not want to for the sake of their children's education. What this study suggests is that

the overriding political argument that our public schools are failing and that parents need an alternative to public schools is not as cut or dry as either side often speaks of it as.

One of the cornerstones of neoliberal, free market economics is that the market will provide sufficient options for consumers (in this case parents finding schools for their children), and that all rational beings will want to participate in this system (Friedman, 1980; 1995; Harvey, 2007). Listening to my participants, however, they simply did not want to engage in this process. They wanted better public school funding. They wanted more equitably allocated resources for all schools and all students. And more than anything else, they shared with me their unwavering faith and trust in public education as an institution and that they did whatever they could to enroll their children in quality public schools. What they wanted, then, was to not have to agonize over school choice. The tension, as introduced above, then is that to make their goal happen, they had to work, worry, and agonize through transfers, house shopping, and non-public schools to accomplish this.

Middle class white parents are using school choice, but not in the way politicians describe. As my participants felt like they had to choose a school, whether that be through moving, charters, or public transfers, it is undoubtable that they participate in school choice. However, each parent strongly resisted the notion that schools would be improved if they were forced to compete. They simply doubted that the public schools in Goldtown were reacting to what was happening at Crystal Charter or the private schools in a way that was deliberate. Additionally, my participants did not follow the more commonly described path of participating in school choice. Even with Douglas and Kathryn sending Campbell to Crystal Charter for a year, or David and Diane keeping James at a private school for a few grades, each of the parents in this study wanted their child in a public school. So rather than use choice systems to flout the

traditional public school system, it was used to enter public schools in a manner that was acceptable to them on a personal and political level.

Another aspect of these interviews that stood out in particular, is that these parents all resisted broad, one-size-fits-all notions of education and schools. While they all highly valued public schools as a larger institution, they did not say public schools across the board are equal. In fact, they consistently described the system as one of inequity, both in funding and in quality. As described throughout chapters four and five, however, they found this as a reason to specifically improve schools, not abandon them for other school models like charters and voucher programs. But despite this strong belief in the idea of public schools, they all were hesitant to say that another school or education decision by other parents, even in the abstract, was bad or faulty in some way. Each of these parents has been on a journey finding a school for their children, a journey that they will all continue on as their children reach middle and high school, or if any of them want to move before all of their children graduate high school. Being on this journey, I believe, makes them empathize with other parents, because they know just how difficult finding a school is and consequently do not want to devalue another's decision, despite their own personal beliefs.

What these parents all have in common, then, is a desire for a strong public school system for everyone, regardless of where they might live, and this desire for a strong public school system should not be ignored. Policymakers should look at funding models and investigate why schools have such disparate outcomes given supposedly equitable funding, along with the effect of privately raised PTO money and the disparity with which schools in Tennessee receive this funding. On a broader scale, Tennessee legislators should seriously consider the accusations leveled at them by my participants, that of wanting to use the public school system to push an

agenda, hinting at the neoliberal economic theories outlined in the initial chapter of this dissertation. Consequently, policymakers should advocate for a moratorium on charter and school choice expansion until policymakers and educators better understand how to improve the existing public schools before expanding the different kinds of choice mechanisms.

Policymakers should push for more research into why and how parents are choosing public schools in Tennessee and investigate ways to meaningfully increase diversity in schools. Reduce the high stakes attached to testing, and trust teachers to teach their students. In short, follow these parents and value public schools in order to make them great places for all children to seek an education.

More than anything, I would encourage policymakers to simply do what I did in this study – talk to parents. Instead of dogmatically clinging to the notion that schools must compete in neoliberal free markets or that the public school system as it currently stands provides equitable education to all of our country’s children, I encourage everyone to pause and consider for a moment the purpose of education in the United States.

For the nearly four decades since the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), policymakers have attempted to make education more of a political tool than a means to provide children an opportunity to meaningfully and equally participate in our nation’s democratic institutions, while living full and comfortable lives. As such, I will end this section with wise words from John Dewey (1903), one of the founders of education in the U.S., as a reminder of what education in our country *should* be:

But the remedy here, as in other phases of our social democracy, is not to turn back, but to go farther- to carry the evolution of the school to a point where it becomes a place for getting and testing experience, as real and adequate to the child upon his existing level as

all the resources of laboratory and library afford to the scientific man upon his level.

What is needed is not any radical revolution, but rather an organization of agencies already found in the schools. It is hardly too much to say that not a single subject or instrumentality is required which is not already found in many schools of the country. All that is required is to gather these materials and forces together and unify their operation. Too often they are used for a multitude of diverse and often conflicting aims. If a single purpose is provided, that of freeing the processes of mental growth, these agencies will at once fall into their proper classes and reinforce each other. (pp. 201-203)

Future Research

In this chapter, I have shown how my findings addressed my research questions, inserted my findings in the existing literature, and grounded my findings in my theoretical framework. While it was not my intent at the start of this project to focus exclusively on middle-class white parents, the development of this study provided a more focused lens through which to look at this phenomenon, but also provided one of the main weaknesses to this study. By only talking to parents from this singular racial and socioeconomic group, there are voices and perspectives that were left out, which might provide dramatically different results.

In future studies, it may prove beneficial to replicate this study with variations of socioeconomic status and racial identity. By looking at all of these different parallel studies together, a broader understanding of how parents perceive public and charter schools and how they navigate school choice in districts that contain a charter school may be obtained. This is also true with how two-thirds of the families participating in this study were largely unfamiliar with Crystal Charter and did not consider a charter school as a potential school choice for their children. While I argue above that this is an interesting finding in and of itself, expanding this

study to interview more parents and see if this is consistent with other middle-class white families in Goldtown would help provide a broader understanding of how families navigate school choice.

A similar argument can be made for focusing more on charter schools than other forms of school choice. While charter schools are the primary form of school choice codified into law in Tennessee, it is obvious from this project that parents are participating in school choice outside of charter schools. Consequently, more research on how parents select public schools and navigate systems to enroll their children at these schools would be beneficial. This is especially true for navigating the public school transfer options that Douglas and Kathryn as well as David and Diane utilized.

Conclusions

By showing how these families in Goldtown navigated school choice to send their children to public schools they perceived as better overall, it is my hope to better examine what parents want in schools in order to better our education system as whole. In highlighting the way in which these parents are resisting the more common pathways of school choice, such as charter schools, and purposefully and actively seeking out public schools, I shed some light on ways in which education professionals and policy makers alike can refocus education reform efforts to provide parents with stronger, more robust schools. Although these five parents present only a small set of opinions on the primacy of a public education and the pathways to improve public education as a whole, their insights and experiences challenge the idea that neoliberal, free market ideologies are the way forward for schools and that traditional public schools should be forced to compete with charter schools run by outside agencies and organizations.

In chapter one I outlined the complicated history of neoliberalism and how it has been used over the past century to dismantle public services. Bourdieu (1998) scathingly wrote of neoliberalism,

And yet the world is there, with the immediately visible effects of the implementation of the great neoliberal utopia: not only the poverty of an increasingly large segment of the most economically advanced societies, the extraordinary growth in income differences, ... the destruction of all the collective institutions capable of counteracting the effects of the infernal machine, primarily those of the state, repository of all of the universal values associated with the idea of the *public realm*.

It is in my opinion, then, that when looking at the current state of public education and the political debates happening as we near the 2020 presidential election, we should all begin to more closely examine the forces at play that influence public education in the United States. We should more closely examine how neoliberalism, specifically charter schools and voucher programs, have worked their way into seeming commonplace – an inherent part of education in the United States. My participants' experiences and stories serve as direct opposition to that kind of thinking. This dissertation is a story of five people who fought to give their children the best education they can, and each of them believed that at the heart of that education was a public school that they *chose* to send their children to.

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Appendices

Appendix A
Bill Sponsors

Bill	Sponsors and Party
Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002	Representatives Winningham (D), Montgomery (R), McDaniel (R), McCord (R), Buttry (R), Baird (R), Black (R), Beavers (R), Boyer (R), Sargent (R), Sroggs (R), Clem (R), Vincent (R), Dunn (R), Wood (R), Pleasant (R), Bittle (R) and Sharp (R) Senators Atchley (R), Ford (D), Blackburn (R), Burchett (R), Burks (D), Carter (R), Clabough (R), Cohen (D), Cooper (D), Crowe (R), Crutchfield (D), Davis (R), Dixon (D), Elsea (R), Fowler (R), Graves (D), Harper (D), Haun (R), Haynes (D), Henry (D), Herron (D), Jackson (D), Kurita (D), Kyle (D), McNally (R), Miller (R), Norris (R), Person (R), Ramsey (R), Rochelle (D), Trail (D), Williams (R) and Mr. Speaker Wilder (D)
Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002: 2009 Amendment	Senators Woodson (R), Gresham (R), Henry, Johnson (R), Beavers (R), Watson (R), Tracy (R), Ketron (R), Mr. Speaker Ramsey (R) and Representatives Harwell (R), Pruitt (D), Weaver (R), Mr. Speaker Williams (R), Coley (R), Maggart (R), Campfield (R), Rich (R), Swafford (R), McCormick (R), Eldridge (R), Haynes (R), Carr (R), Lynn (R), Dunn (R), Winningham (D), Lollar (R), Niceley (R), Dennis (R), U. Jones (D), Hardaway (D)
Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002: 2011 Amendment	Senators Norris (R), Gresham (R) and Johnson (R) and Representatives McCormick (R) and Brooks (R)
Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act of 2002: 2017 Amendment	Representatives Hawk (R), Casada (R), H. Brooks (R), M. White (R), Kumar (R), Ragan (R), Hardaway (D) and Senators Norris (R) and Kelsey (R)

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is David Appleton, a PhD candidate studying education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I invite you to participate in a research study regarding parents/guardians of Kindergarten through 8th grade students zoned for a school in the following zip codes: [redacted].

This study seeks to gain insights into parents' perceptions on the quality of charter schools and public schools, focusing on how this might be impacted by the larger political discussion regarding education. As parents/guardians of students attending a school in East Tennessee in a district with a competing charter school, you provide a unique perspective on how parents in East Tennessee regard public education.

The interview will take roughly 1 hour to complete. If you would like to take part in this study, please contact me via the email address listed below.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please direct them to me:

David Appleton
PhD Candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville
DApplet1@vols.utk.edu

Appendix C

Interview Informed Consent

Consent for Research Participation

Neoliberal Impacts on Parental Perceptions of Charter and Public School Quality:
A Qualitative Case Study

Researcher(s): David A Appleton, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Judson Laughter University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I am asking you to be in this research study because you are the parent or guardian of a child currently enrolled in a school in Goldtown Schools. You must be age 18 or older to participate in the study. The information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to investigate how parents feel about the quality of traditional public schools compared to charter schools in their district, and if and to what extent political rhetoric impacts this perception of quality.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for the length of a single, one-hour interview.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a singular, one hour long interview either over phone, videochat, or in a public setting of your choosing in the greater Goldtown, TN area.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact David Appleton and indicate your desire to be removed from this study. If you choose to no longer be in the study, any interview data collected will be deleted, including any recordings, transcriptions, and written notes.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Possible risks include feelings of discomfort when asked for your opinions about the quality of your child's school, other schools in the area, your personal thoughts and feelings regarding your child's current or former school, or your personal/political beliefs regarding education. Additionally, there is a small risk that this information could be made known, although strict confidentiality procedures (detailed below) will be in place throughout the duration of the study.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit directly from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about how parents feel about traditional public schools in comparison to charter schools, and if there are any political connections to these feelings of quality. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

Only the researchers will have access to your identifying information collected during the study.

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by storing your signed, paper consent form in a locked container in David Appleton's locked office at the University of Tennessee. The recording of the interview will be stored in a secure, password-protected computer and/or mobile device that are owned by David Appleton, the principal researcher. Any transcriptions of this recorded interview will be kept confidential and will substitute any identifying information with a pseudonym chosen by the participant.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.

- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will keep your information to use for potential publication of this research at a later date. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from your research data collected as part of the study

We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will need to pay for transportation costs to the public setting at which the interview will take place, unless conducted via phone/video chat.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers:

David Appleton
Principal Investigator
dapplet1@vols.utk.edu^[L]_[SEP]
(937) 626-0452

Judson Laughter, PhD
Faculty Advisory
jlaught3@utk.edu
(865) 974-8385

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
1534 White Avenue
Blount Hall, Room 408
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (to be completed at time of informed consent)

I have explained the study to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to be in the study.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Appendix D

Parent Perceptions of School Quality Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview. This process is completely voluntary and you can leave at any time. If you choose to do so, any recording of your responses will be deleted before immediately and not included as part of the study. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. The interview process is being recorded by both a voice recorder and through written field notes. Before we begin, let me read to you the informed consent form, and note your agreement, or refusal to participate (read informed consent form and seek written and verbal consent).

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHOSEN SCHOOL

1. What kind of school does your child attend? (For instance, charter, traditional public school.)
 - a. Why did you choose this type of school over others?
2. How would you describe the quality of education your child receives at their school?
3. How would you describe the non-academic aspect of your child's school?
(If needed, suggest communication, extra-curriculars, discipline/behavior, student needs)
4. Is there anything else you'd like to say regarding your child's school?

IF STUDENT ATTENDS EA, ASK ABOUT KCS, OR VICE VERSA

5. How would you describe the quality of education children receive at Crystal Charter or Goldtown Schools?
6. How would you describe the non-academic aspects of this school?
(If needed, suggest communication, extra-curriculars, discipline/behavior, student needs)
7. Is there anything else you'd like to say regarding what you know about this school?

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHARTERS IN GENERAL

8. In general, how would you describe the quality of education children receive at charter schools in comparison to traditional public schools?
9. In general, how would you describe the non-academic aspects of this school?
(If needed, suggest communication, extra-curriculars, discipline/behavior, student needs)
10. In general, how would you compare traditional public schools to charter schools?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to say regarding what you know about charter schools?
12. How would you say you learned all of this about charter schools?

QUESTIONS ABOUT EDUCATION SYSTEM

(questions 13-18 to be asked depending on what is not addressed in answer to Q12.)

13. In general, what are your thoughts regarding the American public education system?
14. How do you feel about education funding?
15. How do you feel about government regulations or influence over education?
16. Overall, how do you feel about teachers and teaching as a profession?
17. How do you feel about teachers' unions?
18. How do you feel about private companies or organizations starting or running schools instead of, or in addition to public schools?
19. Is competition between schools necessary to increase the quality of schools overall?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me regarding education in America?

Appendix E
Final Themes Codebook

Theme	Example	Quantity	Participant(s)	RQs	Ch. 4 section
Bureaucracy negatively affects public education	And I imagine that charter schools, in my, when I think about it, there is probably some really interesting things as far as curriculum that they could probably do because they don't have to follow certain things from a county school board or a state school board.	34	DK, E, DD	1	Desire for better public schools
Educational funding models reduce equity and increases the need for school choice	My personal feeling is that the best way to solve this problem is to properly fund the actual public schools we have. That would be my number one way to do this.	27	DK, E, DD	1	Desire for better public schools
Happy with child's education	Like they are doing reading and they have to, at first they are doing, the teacher would read this oral comprehension and they would have to write down main points. And as the fall has gone on, she has gotten a lot better at that. And now she is doing some reading comprehension too. They have to have a topic sentence, main points, and a concluding sentence and she'll bring that home and is getting excellents, and I'm like, okay! So for me, that seems pretty rigorous for the first grade.	11		2a	What parents want out of public schools
Local school choice works, but larger systemic changes to public education would be better	I would totally agree, and I think that also was a unique thing about Crystal Charter is that their schools is and was created by a local organization, so it was run by people we know. We don't know them personally, but they are very well-known community leaders with a very long running track record of good work.	18	DK, E, DD	1 and 2b	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems

Parents agonize over school choice	And I'll go ahead and be honest, but I agonized about the decision about where to send Campbell for Kindergarten. I kind of have forgotten about it until now, but I agonized about it for the year before Kindergarten. And then I agonized all through kindergarten about if this was the right place. Should we move him? Should we not move him? So we were having, well this is a very condensed version of conversations that were in my head and between us.	29	DK, E, DD	1 and 2c	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems
Privatization adds unnecessary complications and influences to public schools, negatively affecting their purpose	In general, though, charter schools versus public schools, I think the focus should be on the public schools not letting these outside people come in who may not know the community or not have the best interests of the kids at heart. May have a different agenda, may have a conservative agenda or maybe even a far, super far left agenda, or just even a religious agenda.	25	DK, E, DD	1 and 2c	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems
School choice is about more than just picking a school	Where you are going to send your kids to school is a very political choice and it's simultaneously extraordinarily personal. And it's hard.	41	DK, E, DD	1, 2a, and 2b	Difficulty and tensions with participating in school choice systems
Schools need to be about more than grades	I think I've been lucky because the two teachers she has had have not assigned homework, whereas other kindergarten and first grade teachers have. And I guess I'm kind of lucky because one, I don't necessarily, I think there is a time for kids to be kids and that homework is	30	DK, E, DD	1, 2a, and 2b	What parents want out of public schools

	a bit of an added stressor, and also as a working parent sometimes I'm glad				
Schools and teachers should be consistently safe and of high quality	Which speaks to I think the transient nature and I think the at-risk nature of a lot of the kids that were there. And we were like, I don't know if that is the right environment for, for Campbell. And like Kathryn said, I think we were really pleased at first with Crystal Charter, you know. I think as the year went on and we heard some... Our son would come home with some anecdotes.... There was a lot of at-risk kids there too. There was a lot. There was like, there was a rigid disciplinarian system. Maybe more so than I think we were aware there would be.	31	DK, E, DD	1, 2a, and 2b	What parents want out of public schools
Social inequity permeates public schools	There is always going to be disadvantaged or disenfranchised in these types of processes.	17	DK, DD	1	Desire for better public schools
Students need authentically diverse schools	That is part of what we have been looking for. For our kids to be challenged by being around different kinds of families and kids. I remember telling people that my kids are smart. They're going to be fine academically I think, anywhere they go. But what they need help with is learning how to get along with other people. That is really important to me in this era.	16	DK, E, DD	1, 2a, and 2b	What parents want out of public schools

Vita

David Appleton is originally from Dayton, Ohio, where he received an undergraduate degree in English and a Master of Arts in English from Wright State University, focusing his studies on Contemporary American Literature. Following this he returned to Wright State to earn a Master of Education degree, focusing on adolescent and young adult English Language Arts. Having earned his teaching license, he taught high school for several years and periodically taught as an adjunct at a local university in Dayton before moving to Knoxville, Tennessee so his wife could further her career. David taught English at the community college level for a year before returning to school to begin working on his PhD in Theory and Practice of Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. While taking courses for this degree, David took a strong interest in education policy, and the way politics has shaped education in the United States, specifically focusing on charter schools and neoliberal education reforms, and the ways in which these reforms intersect with social justice work. He also developed a strong interest in research methods, earning both qualitative and quantitative research methods graduate certificates.