Arizona’s Mature Education Market: How School and Community Stakeholders Make

Meaning of School Choice Policies

By

Amanda U. Potterton

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Jeanne M. Powers, Chair
David C. Berliner
Gustavo E. Fischman
Gene V Glass

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ABSTRACT

School choice reforms such as charter schools, vouchers, open enrollment, and private and public school tax credit donation programs have expanded throughout the United States over the past twenty years. Arizona’s long-standing public school choice system enrolls a higher percentage of public school students in charter schools than any state besides Washington D.C. A growing number of Arizona’s charter schools are managed by for-profit and nonprofit Education Management Organizations (EMOs). Advocates of school choice argue that free-market education approaches will make public schools competitive and nimble as parents’ choices place pressures on schools to improve or close. This, then, improves all schools: public, private, and charter. Critics are concerned that education markets produce segregation along racial and social class lines and inequalities in educational opportunities, because competition favors advantaged parents and children who can access resources. Private and for-profit schools may see it in their interest to exclude students who require more support. School choice programs, then, may further marginalize students who live in poverty, who receive special education services, and English language learners.

We do not fully understand how Arizona’s mature school choice system affects parents and other stakeholders in communities “on the ground.” That is, how are school policies understood and acted out? I used ethnographic methods to document and analyze the social, cultural, and political contexts and perspectives of stakeholders at one district public school and in its surrounding community, including its charter schools. I examined: (a) how stakeholders perceived and engaged with schools; (b) how stakeholders understood school policies, including school choice policies; and (c) what influenced families’ choices.
Findings highlight how most stakeholders supported district public schools. At the same time, some “walked the line” between choices that were good for their individual families and those they believed were good for public schools and society. Stakeholders imagined “community” and “accountability” in a range of ways, and they did not all have equal access to policy knowledge. Pressures related to parental accountability in the education market were apparent as stakeholders struggled to make, and sometimes revisit, their choices, creating a tenuous schooling environment for their families.
DEDICATIONS

This study is dedicated to my family.

For Eden and Levi, my treasures, and for Graeme.

I love you three so much and I am so grateful for you.

Eden and Levi, your joy and light spread fun and laughter when my writing and studying gets too tricky and serious. Smiles, kind eyes, climbing, art, transformers, pictures from class, monkey bars, creativity, and stories have made my days so many times, and I feel so happy to be your mum. We are proud of you, always. So take good risks, love and dream really big, serve well, be free… there is the joy, and don’t be afraid to fall. You can confidently get back up over and over again. You were made to be unique! This study is dedicated to you, and thanks for sweetly letting me type in the middle of the night.

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The Cazins and Pottertons, with thanks and love.

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And to parents, teachers, and school leaders.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In my second year in the Educational Policy and Evaluation Ph.D. program, I wrote a commentary that examined publicly available demographic data for Arizona charter schools operated by two high-profile Education Management Organizations (EMOs). There were more than 500 charter schools in Arizona at the time, and these two EMOs had charter schools that were well known for their high academic rankings not only locally but, also, nationally. After it was published in Teachers College Record (Potterton, 2013), prominent education blogger Diane Ravitch posted a link to the commentary and, shortly afterwards, Sarah, a mother in Arizona, emailed me. Sarah had read the commentary and said that she had been concerned for some time about these EMO’s increasing presence in the areas surrounding the district public school where her own children attended, Southwest Learning Site (hereafter, SLS).

Her concerns were similar to what I had reported in the commentary and later summarized on Ravitch’s blog when the EMOs were expanding nationally. These schools vastly underserved minority students, poor pupils (recipients of free or reduced price lunches), pupils who were English language learners, or pupils who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). I suggested in the commentary that producing high scores on standardized tests with low-income minority children was hard for both charter schools and district public schools (Potterton, 2013). Sarah had other concerns, which I had also raised related to questionable enrollment procedures, high attrition rates, and “counseling out” students who might negatively affect average school performance rankings (Welner, 2013). My commentary suggested that there was an important question to be asked about
comparability between these charter schools and other district public schools. To wit: Is it even fair to include these schools in a comparison with Arizona’s public schools, since they are not drawing a representative population of Arizona’s public school students?

Sarah’s email to me raised the same question, a portion of which I share here with her permission. She wrote:

Dear Ms. Potterton,

My name is [Sarah], and I have two children attending public school in the [Desert Public School System]. For the past several months, I have been working with the [Area Interfaith Group] to advocate for the passage of a school override for our district. I am sorry to say that we were unsuccessful in this regard — our override failed and we are now faced with the task of cutting over four million dollars from our budget. Two years ago, [an EMO] bought an old [company] building and turned it into a school, [an EMO charter school]. The neighborhood they chose had excellent public school choices — [named district public schools in the area]. Many parents who hadn’t any reason to leave their neighborhood public school left for the promise of a private school education in a public school setting. I haven’t any doubt that this impacted the outcome of our election. It was with great interest, then, that I read your article… Do you have time, and would you be interested, in participating in a conversation with a group of public school advocates about your findings? Many are just beginning to wake up to the dangers that charter schools represent to neighborhood public schools, but they are unsure about the details of what comprises that danger. I think you could be very helpful in that regard.

Sarah and I did meet. Josh, the leader of the Area Interfaith Group (hereafter AIG), an institution and community organizing group that works with leaders throughout Arizona to
educate, strategize, and develop the capacities of churches, schools, nonprofit organizations, and unions to foster socially-just changes, also came to our first meeting. Josh was a father whose children had once or still attended SLS, and he had been instrumental in supporting parents, staff, and community and institution leaders in organizing around issues that were affecting their local schools, including SLS. Many individuals, I would come to find out over time, knew of Josh’s strong leadership skills. Sarah, Josh, and his wife, Kimberly, talked with me at our first meeting about their concerns for their school district and the state’s public schools, as charter schools and other school choice policies and programs were continuing to expand and district public schools were struggling financially. They also taught me about the area where their children attended school and shared with me some background information about AIG. Josh, particularly, wondered how I might be useful to them in their efforts.

I began to spend time with Sarah and Josh, attending meetings whenever I was invited because I was intrigued. I deeply respected and was impressed with their work, and I also cared about the same issues. At that time, Sarah, Josh, and other members of AIG were holding house meetings to organize around the bond override that had not passed in the district, as Sarah described to me in her first email. When I was not in classes or studying, I was often with them, and I was fascinated by the strong, strategic, and intentional ways in which Sarah, Josh, and others were working to educate local people in the community surrounding SLS about the importance of an increase in funding for Arizona’s public schools.

I felt very fortunate to have been welcomed into this community of parents and school leaders whom I respected. The more I came to know families and educators in the area, the more I saw that, beyond people’s concerns about political and economic issues
related to public education in Arizona, many also had strong feelings about schooling options for their children. In the midst of working to promote local district public schools to support the bond override, some parents were also faced with the tension of choosing between competing charter schools and other district public schools that were also options for their children to attend due to Arizona’s open enrollment policies. As I began to get to know people better, they began to share their stories about choosing schools for their children with me.

I started to talk with more SLS stakeholders. “SLS stakeholders” refer to people who were physically close to the school as well as people who were active in the school and identified as SLS community members through their interactions and affiliations, such as through community organizations and churches. In the discussion that follows, I use the terms “community members” and “stakeholders” interchangeably, but I clarify to whom I am referring. I also talked with stakeholders in the surrounding community if they had a link, knowledge of, or affiliation in some way with SLS, and this group refers to parents, school leaders, teachers, students, education administrators, and other members of the public who, though not directly involved with SLS, were in some way familiar with SLS because of their affiliations with nearby charter schools or other district public or private schools. Again, if I interchange terms, I explain to whom I am referring. SLS stakeholders talked openly and warmly, often with deep emotion and care, about the difficulties they had with the struggling financial state of the district’s public schools, school changes that some of them had made for their children, and personal and public problems that they sometimes faced when choosing public schools over charter or private schools in the area.

Many individuals, including parents, teachers, school leaders, and people who were connected to the school in different ways, were concerned about both the political and
economic issues related to Arizona’s public schools and, at the same time, were seriously grappling with the issues inherent in school choice systems. That is, when parents were faced with problems in their children’s school or district, they had the option to exit and to choose other schools. The options were, for some, attractive and, for others, repellent, but I also saw that their feelings and perspectives, and even their choices, could change.

Ultimately, even though they truly cared about public education, some parents chose to send their children to charter schools or other public or private schools because of their increasingly troubled feelings about the state of their local district public schools. For many stakeholders, this was a painstaking process. I conducted this study because it was obvious to me that the stakeholders in the area had important experiences to share. They had such emotionally powerful stories, and so much to teach about how they were working for change in their local public schools or how they were struggling with schooling for their children. This dissertation used ethnographic methods to understand these stakeholders in their lives and surroundings and is an account of their perceptions and experiences with school choice in one local setting.

Whilst I was getting to know more people in the area, I was searching and becoming more aware of research aimed at understanding the experiences of school choice from the perspectives of school leaders, middle-class parents, African-American families, and immigrants. I began to concentrate more closely on local and state politics, social and cultural contexts for individual actors, and district-level influences, all of which were a part of how school choice fell into place in local settings. I also began to see increasingly that the commentary I had written only just touched the surface of school choice programs, and that people’s lived experiences and sensemaking regarding their private and public lives and priorities were much more complicated than could ever be found in statistics. Whereas
debates about the school choice movement are often dichotomous, I observed a much more nuanced set of positions “on the ground.”

As a mother, one-time teacher and school leader, and developing researcher, I saw how school choice policies and practices produced for many a complicated and intense set of emotional experiences that affected their lives in many ways. This is likely different from the experiences of people in other parts of the United States where school choice programs are not as deeply engrained in public school policies and practices. My two young children entered public school during my study. Having grown up in Ohio in the 1980s and 1990s before charter schools were a part of the education landscape, I had neither seen nor experienced public education like this. Students in Ohio attended their neighborhood public schools, or perhaps a private Catholic school, although no one I can recall went to a Catholic school in my neighborhood.

I realized that there are communities of people in this country and beyond, some of whom I stay in touch with, who have never experienced public education of the type I was encountering in Arizona as a mother, previous educator, and researcher. Yet, I am confident that, as one of the mothers in my study commented, “And now with Trump being [at the time of the interview, the next possible President]…” people will be experiencing public education in new and unprecedented ways. President Donald Trump’s Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has already started to advocate for expanding school choice (Klein, 2017). This dissertation is an attempt to shed light on, and to provide voice to, individuals’ and groups’ important and lived experiences, which in many ways deeply affect not only their own lives and their children’s lives, but others’ children’s lives as well.
Research Questions and Arizona’s Policy Context

The three research questions that guided this study are:

1. How do stakeholders in a mature school choice market perceive and engage with a district public school of choice and its surrounding community, including its charter schools?

2. How do stakeholders understand school policies including, but not limited to, school choice policies?

3. What influences families’ school choices?

I developed these questions after having already established relationships with people in the school (SLS) and its surrounding community because it had become clear that their rich stories, perceptions, and actions might help to inform others about how stakeholders engage with schools and choice in a market-based education system like Arizona’s.

Throughout the United States, federal, state, and local policies, often backed by increasingly influential advocates and philanthropic foundations, continue to rapidly expand provisions for school choice, which include charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and intra- or inter-district open enrollment programs (Ball, 2009; Belfield & Levin, 2005; Burch, 2009; Hess & Henig, 2015; Klein, 2017; Lubienski, 2009; Powers, 2009). Specifically, Arizona’s market-based school choice programs have been continually expanded by a Republican-dominated state legislature for at least 25 years alongside a mega-narrative that was “crystallized in the famous A Nation at Risk report” (Mehta, 2013, p. 286). A Nation at Risk declared that the United States education system was in crisis and in need of radical reform to meet the needs of a competing global economy (Apple, 2006; Mehta, 2013). The power of this mega-narrative, which is arguably not supported by research (Sahlberg, 2017), is reflected in Arizona where, in 1994, the state legislature approved largely deregulated charter
schools and open enrollment for all public school students in an effort to create a public school market (Powers, 2009; Powers, Topper, & Potterton, 2015).

In 2015, Arizona enrolled the second highest percentage of public school children in charter schools after Washington D.C., and more than 600 charter schools operated in Arizona (Arizona Charter Schools Association, 2014). Arizona is one of a small number of states that allows Education Management Organizations (EMOs) to be charter holders (Miron & Gulosino, 2013). For-profit EMOs, headed by politically-influential chief educational officers (CEOs), oversee a growing number of the state’s charter schools (Miron & Gulosino, 2013). The state of Arizona ranks second in the United States, behind Michigan, in the total number of for-profit EMOs (27) that operate charter schools and second, behind Texas and California, for the total number of nonprofit EMOs, of which there are 31 operating within the state’s borders (Miron & Gulosino, 2013).

Arizona’s free-market approach to education has led researchers and the popular media to describe the state as the “Wild West” of the charter school movement (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Maranto & Gresham, 1999). The state’s school choice policies can be seen as part of the expansion of neoliberal reforms, which emphasize the private provision of public services (Harvey, 2005). Although state intervention is often required to create markets for public services, the state should also withdraw once these markets are established. Indeed, Arizona’s school choice policies are continually expanding the role of the private sector in education. Charter schools, tax credit programs for public and private schools, open enrollment policies, and an Empowerment Scholarship Account program, which allows students to opt out of public schools and use public funds for private school tuition, are all changing Arizona’s traditional public school systems and the communities where they are situated.
Significance of the Study

Advocates frame school choice policies as beneficial because they create education markets, reduce government oversight of schools, and create more efficient education systems over the longer term. When parents have the freedom to act as consumers, schools will improve as they compete for students (Chubb & Moe, 1990). On the supply side, markets release schools from institutional bureaucratic control, which will allow them to be more nimble and competitive (Friedman, 1955). Critics argue that school choice creates winners and losers in a commodified education system because such policies tend to favor students and families with greater access to information and resources, and may provide incentives for schools to exclude students who require more resources or are more difficult to teach. Thus, critics say, school choice policies may further marginalize students who live in poverty, students who have disabilities, and students who are English language learners, leading to greater segregation.

These often polarized debates do not help us understand how individuals, families, and community members actually negotiate this complicated landscape, nor do they consider the ways in which communities are shaped by school choice policies. Further, debates that surround the creation of voucher systems and charter schools — which are considered public schools but which often co-exist with private groups — are often based in ideology or even political partisanship rather than on facts (Belfield & Levin, 2005; Reckhow, Grossmann, & Evans, 2015). Therefore, the implications of school choice policies that promote certain school sectors over others without considering evidence related to intended and unintended effects for students, families, teachers, schools, and communities risks neglecting important social equity and justice issues and further segregating and isolating some students and families.
I address a gap in current knowledge by analyzing stakeholders’ experiences and tensions associated with market-based school choice policies from the viewpoint of an Arizona district public school and its surrounding community. My study addresses how and why families’ interactions with a mature, state-wide education market can at times reproduce and, in other instances, disrupt commonly held notions about public schooling, neighborhood schools, communities, and public spaces. As market-based policies and practices become increasingly popular in the United States and internationally, a study that attempts to understand how school choice policies unfold in public spaces is timely and relevant.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

In this first chapter, I provide the backstory that centers this study. The purpose of the study was to understand how stakeholders in one school and surrounding community make meaning of and are influenced by school choice policies and practices. I also explain how the increasing presence of local EMOs in the community surrounding SLS was the impetus for this study. Had the EMO’s presence not been so contentious, Sarah would likely never have contacted me, and I would not have had the opportunity to hear and see what was happening in and around SLS.

In Chapter 2, I describe the research literature on school choice policies and programs. In particular, I describe studies that consider school choice effects on stratification and charter school achievement, since these are most relevant to this study. I examine the literature that discusses how schools respond to education market policies and how parents choose schools for their children. I also discuss the conceptual framework that guides the study. In Chapter 3, I explain the research methods that I used to collect and analyze data, share an overview of my research timeline, describe the school site and
surrounding community context, explain limitations, and reveal my position as a researcher in this study.

Chapters 4 through 7 provide findings from and analyses of the data. In Chapter 4, I focus specifically on an early analysis of data that I had collected during the first months of fieldwork. I specifically analyze SLS and its surrounding community, including nearby charter schools. This early analysis offers an important cornerstone that I return to as the story develops.

Chapter 5 describes how stakeholders perceived and engaged with SLS and its surrounding community, including its charter schools. Some people who had not been to the school site, which I explain in Chapter 4, misunderstood what the school offered in terms of curriculum and methods, and I illustrate how stakeholders responded to this misunderstanding. The chapter also describes a wide variety of influences that shaped stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences, their varying levels of access to school choice information, and their general understanding of school policies, including school choice policies.

Chapters 6 and 7 specifically address what influenced families’ school choices. In Chapter 6, I discuss the different ways that families understood and prioritized notions of “community” in their choices and, in Chapter 7, I similarly consider how they understood and prioritized notions of “accountability.” These were two significant and recurring themes that I observed in the data and, thus, are organized as separate chapters to allow for more detailed examinations of each theme. I also suggest, in Chapter 7, that there is an area of accountability that has emerged in the wake of school choice policies that has been too little studied in the literature — parental accountability. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the study with a
discussion of the project’s findings and a consideration of implications for policymakers, practitioners, and parents, and for future research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine school choice studies that consider the research literature and debates related to school choice effects on segregation across issues of race, class, and special education services and charter schools’ achievement effects. Then, I review literature that describes responses to education market policies in local contexts. Next, I describe the theoretical approach that I used in this study to understand policy. Finally, I explain the conceptual framework that guides this study, which includes literature related to how schools can be imagined as communities (Cobb-Roberts, Dorn, & Shircliffe, 2006), how individuals can utilize social capital to both create more inclusive environments and to exclude others (Putnam, 2000), and how notions of accountability are embedded in the school choice movement (Garn & Cobb, 2001, 2008).

School Choice Evidence and Debates

School Choice and Stratification

Critics have warned that school choice markets can exacerbate inequalities in educational opportunities. More than 20 years ago in Arizona, the increased presence of charter schools resulted in de facto ethnic segregation in some areas, and charter schools were significantly more segregated than the state’s traditional public schools (Cobb & Glass, 1999). Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2011) found that, across almost all states and metropolitan areas of the United States, charter schools isolated students by race and class. When considering how parents choose, though, a more complex picture of segregation was revealed (Garcia, 2008). Garcia’s (2008) findings showed that, in Arizona as in other states, parents chose schools that were less diverse than the schools that they left. Yet, he also
suggested that it was important to consider more closely the circumstances in which this was happening. For example, specialized, or “niche” schools, which are supported by the market-based school choice policies in Arizona, might attract a specific body of students for focused purposes (Garcia, 2008) and thus should be considered in context.

Competitive-based models for school choice have, in some cases, incentivized charter school groups to strategically arrange themselves in more affluent neighborhoods and, therefore, may exacerbate unequal access to school choice programs for students from different backgrounds (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Such competition has also encouraged an increase in the enrollment of white students into some charter schools (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Associates, 2013), and has been described by researchers as “white flight” intensified by school choice (Renzulli & Evans, 2005).

Concerns about further stratifying students based on their special education service needs has also been examined. For example, Garay (2011) found that, during the 2002-2003 school year in Arizona, students with more severe disabilities who required higher amounts of funding to support their special education needs were less likely to attend charter schools.

Evidence of both “skimming” and “cropping” has been found in school choice programs, as well. Market-oriented reforms can encourage schools to selectively “cream skim” elite students (West, Ingram, & Hind, 2006) from more traditional public school settings. They may also encourage “cropping” if school choice programs do not equally support all students by, for example, excluding English language learners and students with special needs tacitly by not providing resources and service provisions (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002).

Market-based choice may also result in decreased democratic accountability for schools (DiMartino & Scott, 2013; Noguera, 1994; Scott & DiMartino, 2009) and a thinning
of collective political actions in a democracy (Apple, 2012) under new incentivist market-based systems (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011). This can lead to further marginalization of some individuals and groups when they are less able to take part in governance at school and district levels. Moreover, the rapid entry and growth of nonprofit and profit-making charter schools and Education Management Organization (EMOs) have raised questions about the prospects for equitable access for students in public education (Miron & Gulosino, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; Robertson, 2015; Saltman, 2014). As an example, Robertson (2015) isolated for-profit charter school organizations and found that, across the United States, they are less likely to have Title I status than other charter schools.

**Charter School Effectiveness**

Some researchers are concerned about potential negative achievement effects of charter schools on traditional public schools (Ni, 2009; Ni & Rorrer, 2012). There are many analyses of charter school achievement in comparison to traditional public schools (e.g., Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2012; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2009, 2013; Forster, 2013; Hoxby, 2003; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; Sass, 2006). Among the most referenced studies are those conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). CREDO’s (2013) most recent study highlighted that charter schools served more students living in poverty than they had in previous years and that there were small impacts on charter schools’ student academic achievement growth in comparison to traditional public schools’ student academic achievement growth.

A meta-analysis of the effect of charter schools on student achievement by Betts and Tang (2011) showed that, in some cases, charter schools outperformed traditional public schools while, in other cases, they underperformed (Betts & Tang, 2011) and that there were
not significant positive or negative effects either way. An updated version of this meta-
analysis (Betts & Tang, 2014) indicated that, although there were no significant differences
between charter schools and traditional public schools on achievement for reading, there was
evidence of achievement gains for charter schools in mathematics. A study that corrected
for demographics in a statistical model using National Assessment of Educational Progress
(NAEP) school achievement data found that public schools outperformed both private and
charter schools in the United States (C. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014; S. T. Lubienski &
C. Lubienski, 2006). In particular, the Lubienskis’ (2014) findings were controversial
(Greene, 2014; C. Lubienski, 2014; Wolf, 2014), widely publicized, and debated, which
highlights how the school choice movement is of pointed interest to the public. Researchers
have shown how media increasingly influences a politicized and often ideologically based
school choice reform climate (Henig, 2008).

Finally, Berends’ (2015) review of the research on how charter schools affect student
achievement and educational attainment reported overall results that were in general
agreement with the results of Betts and Tang’s (2011, 2014) meta-analysis. Across the
studies in his review, Berends (2015) found that findings were mixed for charter school
students’ achievement and positive for charter school students who graduated from high
school and attended college. Berends (2015) concluded that it would be helpful to move
research in a different direction that focuses on understanding social relationships in schools
and the “collective nature of schools, particularly when examining different types of schools
of choice” (p. 174).
Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts of School Choice Markets

According to the rationale that underlies most school choice policies, parents acting rationally will gather all available information about schools to inform their choices about their children’s schools. A key assumption driving such policies is that, on the demand side, when parents have the freedom to act as consumers, schools will improve as they compete for students (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, critical researchers have shown that parents’ school choices are complex, and do not always conform to the assumptions of rational choice theory. Rather, they are often shaped by concerns about their children’s safety, moral values, location and convenience, and a desire for shared cultural, economic, and social affiliations (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Garcia, 2008, 2010; Glazerman, 1998; Holme, 2002; Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Roch, 1998; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Thomas, 2010; Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

Others maintain that the market model is faulty for education (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2014; Smith & Meier, 1995) and that competition rhetoric can be dangerous since some parents are drawn to school choice for non-market reasons including community empowerment and cultural diversity, and because markets tend to benefit already advantaged groups (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002; Henig, 1994). Further, clear distinctions between “public” and “private” lines in education are weakening (Ball, 2009; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Burch, 2009) as school privatization grows. School privatization refers to instances where “private sector actors are partnering and contracting with school districts to provide supplementary services” (Scott & DiMartino, 2009, p. 432; see also Belfield & Levin, 2005). As briefly mentioned in the previous section, some researchers have raised concerns about how democratic approaches to policy, such as public participation in governance of schools, might be compromised if concepts of public welfare and collective action are

School-Level Responses to School Choice Markets

Market-based models for education have been met with resistance in some school-level settings. In New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, charter schools became the primary means for reconstructing the New Orleans schools (Jabbar, 2015). Buras (2012, 2014) described the passion and defiance of one grassroots group in New Orleans that demanded the reopening of their traditional public school under a charter, thus becoming the only charter granted outside of any collaboration with management organizations. Local school leaders are responding to market-based reforms in New Orleans, as well, and they notice competitive pressures (Jabbar, 2015a, 2015b, 2016).

Cucchiara (2013) found that, in one urban public school setting, leaders strategically marketed to entice middle-class families into their urban public schools. Yet Horvat (2012) documented how middle-class parents were also “pushed out” in another setting when they attempted to integrate into urban public schools by activating social class resources to benefit their children’s schools but, perhaps more subtly, their own children. Such experiences revealed cultural misunderstandings and tensions associated with gentrification and school choice through open enrollment programs (Horvat, 2012).

Immigrant youths’ experiences with school choice in New York City was sometimes dependent on school-level leaders’ individual efforts to support families in accessing resources to help with choosing, and Sattin-Bajaj (2014) suggests that, without district-level mandates for schools to provide assistance for families as they make choices, equitable access to schools cannot be achieved. Finally, Yoon (2016) explained how parental school
choice in Vancouver, Canada, worked to reproduce inequalities in urban schools. Stigmas associated with social class in marginalized urban schools kept many youths from wanting to attend those schools out of fear (Yoon, 2016). These studies, which examine the social, cultural, and political contexts of school choice for local stakeholders, have highlighted the more complicated aspects of school choice policies and programs. They can help us to understand school choice in ways that reports on test achievements and attainment measures cannot (Berends, 2015).

A Framework for Understanding Policy

The Interplay of Structure, Culture, and Agency

To understand education policies such as school choice “on the ground,” we need to start with people's activities and interactions in the everyday settings of school life and understand how these are shaped by actions and events in other contexts. In this study, I view market-based school choice policies as the result of multi-directional, historically situated processes that are shaped by structure, culture, and agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Structure refers to the rules, arrangements, and organizations at the macro (such as large-scale government systems) and micro levels (for example, policies and procedures that shape activities within schools or community groups).

Culture, or the norms, values, and morals through which people live and identify, also affects the implementation, formation, and evolution of education policies. A third important factor is agency, whereby actors’ choices, individually or collectively, might reproduce or transform structures through an iterative process of understanding and acting upon their interpretations of policies and issues (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).
Policies are potentially fluid, continually constructed and re-constructed, and shaped by both structures and people who vary in their goals and perspectives as well as the amount of power and influence they have as they negotiate school policies (Archer, 1995; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002).

For more robustly understanding school choice policies and practices, rather than prioritizing one or another of these three areas and placing the others in the background, considering all three concepts helps us engage the non-linear, messy, and multi-directional aspects of individuals’ and groups’ cultural, political, economic, and social lives (Datnow et al., 2002). These aspects of social life both transform and are transformed by market-based school choice policies and practices. Datnow et al. (2002) explain these multi-directional interactions between structure, culture, and agency as the complex, continual co-construction of policies built in the process of practice.

I also consider issues of power, since all actors are not equal in their ability to engage in policy creation and engagement (Datnow et al., 2002). For example, charter school organizations have the ability to form boards through appointment rather than through
election, therefore potentially shifting structural and cultural power toward particular actors and away from democratic processes and public spaces. On the other hand, parents can take action as agents by leaving traditional district or charter schools. Hirschman (1970) describes this consumer-based type of exit as a withdrawal of voice. Individuals and groups can also disrupt commonly held narratives about education structures and policies by protesting, refusing to take part in school choice programs, and by acting out counter-narratives about the effects of market-based theory in public education. Overall, through the rich, contextually-oriented, and multi-layered frame provided by structure, culture, and agency, critical ethnographers can document and analyze how and why individuals, groups, and communities interpret and make decisions related to market-based school choice policies.

I use this conceptualization of the interplay between structure, culture, and agency (Datnow et al., 2002) as an orienting frame to help understand and analyze a mature, market-based school choice system from the perspective of stakeholders at one district public school and in its surrounding community, including charter schools and other competing district public schools. Such an examination can contribute to the extant body of empirical literature related to social and cultural contexts of market-based public school systems in local settings which, until recently, received less attention in school choice research and debates. The following conceptual ideas address key aspects of structure, culture, and agency as they are relevant for this study.

**Imagining Schools as Communities**

One particularly relevant aspect of culture is how actors in local settings understand the notion of community. Cobb-Roberts, Dorn, and Shireliffe (2006) adapted Benedict Anderson’s (2006) concept of imagined communities to problematize the notion of a school
community. Anderson (2006) suggested that nationalism is socially constructed, or imagined, through strong cultural symbols, beliefs, and affinities. Agents take part in “imagining” communities by constructing identities and forming affiliations. Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) examined how adults imagine schools as communities by constructing what can often be conflicting and problematic notions of a school community.

Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) offer four possible theoretical explanations for how schools might be viewed as imagined communities. First, from a functionalist perspective, schools are understood by people as places where like-minded individuals raise children in a manner that can facilitate adults’ expectations of rational social control and order (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006). Second, materialist explanations of schools as imagined communities highlight the opportunistic advantages that families generate through sharing information about resources for “one’s children or the children of one’s friends” (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006, p. 14). These advantages, which Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) describe as a hoarding mechanism, accrue to some families via social networks. This theory also draws attention to processes of exclusion, whereby some families “win” and other families inevitably “lose.”

Third, schools may offer opportunities to build communities in specialized curricular environments or in relation to specific cultural values. These environments may be promoted as predominantly inclusive or exclusive, although this distinction is likely inaccurate since, for communities to exist at all, they necessarily require the existence of outsiders. Here, social capital, or the ways in which people develop class knowledge, skills, and networks with others whom they know in order to achieve economic gains, and cultural capital, or the ability and understanding that people have to share cultural resources for non-economic purposes, both describe how individuals build connections (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006).
Finally, an institutional-identity theory of schools as imagined communities explains how individuals navigate the cold, business-like, and bureaucratic aspects of institutional sites, which can be used for both facilitating public processes or creating obstacles (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006). As schools in a market-based system are increasingly modeled after organizational and business-like structures, adults might resist these models in favor of more personalized and social notions of public spaces. In the struggle to make meaning of schooling as a place where they can make connections between schools and home, they might imagine schools as communities as more intimate settings as “a way of blunting the institutional characteristics of a school” (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006, p. 17). School communities, then, can more easily be perceived as family-oriented and community-integrated rather than focused on the structural organization of public sites (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006).

There are numerous problems associated with such imaginings of schools as communities, according to Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006), because bounded communities include insiders and outsiders through romanticized and nostalgic memories of some past age of community and caring. While competition and group formations occur in many areas of life, problems occur when conflict arises between individuals and groups around how to best support and maintain communities, especially when individuals are faced with a multitude of choices. Kanno and Norton (2003) suggested that the concept of “imagined communities” may also provide space for exploring “creativity, hope, and desire in identity construction,” (p. 248), and for imagining not only the “real” world, but, also, possible alternative worlds.
School Choice and the Fragility of Public Institutions

Social capital, then, can be used to both include and exclude. When faced with a wide variety of choices for schooling in a market-based system, it is important to consider the many ways in which people interact by utilizing the networks and affiliations with which they are a part and to think about how these interactions may be affecting public institutions like schools. In examining levels of social capital and the ways in which people identify, Putnam (2000) distinguished between “bridging” social capital, which involves allowing and encouraging access to external networks and is inclusive, and “bonding” social capital, which is inward and exclusive. Identities and groups, according to Putnam (2000), can be directed either way.

In Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000) Putnam highlighted the importance of high levels of social connectedness, including community involvement for schools’ success. His analysis provides insight into the ways in which social networks have declined throughout America’s history (Putnam, 2000), and how such changes may contribute to the tensions and contradictions highlighted by Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006). Putnam (2000) connects the notion of schools as communities of learning to the school choice reform approaches that were in earlier stages of development in the United States at the time of his writing. He stated:

Indeed, two of the more controversial reform approaches — the creation of charter schools and the provision of publicly financed vouchers for kids to attend private schools — may be viewed as attempts by parents to give their kids the benefits of the “communal orientation” that produces exceptional student behavior and performance. Critics of choice programs fear they will only exacerbate existing educational inequities. Supporters argue that putting schooling into the invisible
hand of the free market will improve quality for everyone because schools will be forced to compete on outcomes. While it is too soon to tell which side is right, we do have evidence that if “choice” programs work, their success may turn less on the magic of the marketplace than on the magic of social capital. (p. 305)

Both Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) and Putnam (2000) provide useful lenses through which to consider the ways in which people engage with social networks and through social and cultural affiliations in a complicated school choice market. If people’s interpretations of schools as imagined communities can be both inclusive and exclusive, as suggested by Putnam (2000) and Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006), then it is important to discern the problems associated with practical choices and decisions about who is an insider and who is an outsider in schools (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006). Adding to the difficulty and complexity of understanding school choice systems “on the ground” is the increasing competitive pressures faced by schools, parents, and communities. In practice, stakeholders, through their individual choices, must navigate complex social, cultural, economic, and political contexts as they engage with, imagine, and, perhaps, re-imagine notions of public schooling, charter schools, neighborhood schools, communities, and public spaces. Such choices, in an increasingly competitive educational environment, invariably result in tensions between public and private life.

**Accountability and School Choice**

Accountability is a foundational concept for school choice reforms (Garn & Cobb, 2008). Yet little research has specifically examined stakeholders’ experiences with school choice in an increasingly complex “accountability” environment. Complicating matters further, individuals perceive accountability and school choice policies in many different ways, and their interpretations are patterned by both personal and collective concerns (e.g.,
Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz, 1996; Jennings, 2010). Garn and Cobb (2008) have identified four models of accountability embedded in the school choice movement: bureaucratic, performance, market, and professional. The authors’ (Garn & Cobb, 2008) models also sometimes overlap as individuals attempt to make meaning of school choice policies and programs, interpret competitive pressures, and make choices.

Bureaucratic accountability refers to compliance and monitoring systems that support the regulations and rules that govern education systems. Linda Darling-Hammond (as cited in Garn & Cobb, 2008) describes bureaucratic accountability as a set of rules and norms aimed at ensuring that public functions are performed in a way that is democratic and legal. Under performance accountability systems, states, districts, or schools are ranked based on the results of standardized tests. Market accountability is the process whereby consumers, or customers, choose between schools and, when schools are no longer viable, they will eventually close. Under market accountability, government regulations could also be used to proactively prevent monopolies in a market and to require schools to provide accurate and complete information to families (Darling-Hammond, as cited in Garn & Cobb, 2008). Finally, professional accountability refers to the idea that experts in practice assume responsibility for their work, and thus are involved in decision-making and monitoring of their progress and standards.

The complicated processes of school choice in local contexts may result in individuals’ and groups’ interpreting notions of accountability in different ways. Such interpretations can be affected by competition-oriented school choice rhetoric from individuals and groups, such as EMOs or leaders at high-performing traditional public schools, and can shape the ways in which individuals and groups think about and act upon their school choices. However, this framework does not address parents’ understanding of
these increasing pressures of competition. The ways in which school choice makes parents “accountable” also requires consideration.

**Parents’ Responses to Market Accountability**

Researchers have examined how parents do or do not engage in choosing schools. Lareau (2014) suggested that, although middle-class parents in her study did rely on social networks to gather information about schools, in many instances they did not engage in systematic research when choosing their children’s schools, even though the decision was of extremely high importance to them. However, Altenhofen, Berends, and White (2016) found that families in high-income, suburban neighborhoods in Denver, Colorado did “do their research” (p. 1) when choosing schools, whether they were traditional public schools or charter schools. This research included checking test scores, visiting schools, meeting with principals, and using social networks to make decisions (Altenhofen et al., 2016). These conflicting findings have implications for thinking through how parents understand and take part in school choice, and the crucial assumption that parents, as consumers, will help to facilitate the invisible hand of the market. It is imperative, therefore, to understand parents’ experiences and actions in a variety of contexts, and details involved, or not involved, in school choice processes.¹ As school choice policies and programs continue to grow, these types of findings are helpful for understanding the factors driving education markets.

School choice policies and programs can potentially place pressure on parents that they experience as a form of accountability. Qualitatively, researchers have analyzed the

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¹ As children get older their parents may be less involved in school choice decisions. For example, Condliffe, Boyd, and DeLuca (2015), in identifying the neighborhood contexts that shaped educational opportunities for inner-city students in Baltimore, determined that youths themselves, although constrained by district policies, academic backgrounds, peers, and family impositions, were usually the key players in making choices about their schooling rather than their parents.
more localized effects of charter schools “on the ground,” all of which may have an effect on parents’ role in choosing schools. Studies about school choice policies’ potential for racial exclusion and class stratification (Stambach & Becker, 2006), charter school autonomy (Finnigan, 2007), and autonomy for teachers and administrators in private versus public schools (Glass, 1997) describe a range of important factors affecting schools and, potentially, parents’ choices in a school choice system. Qualitative studies investigating parental choice processes including parents’ construction of choice sets (e.g., André-Bechely, 2005; Bell, 2009; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Villavicencio, 2013) and effects of school choice programs on parental engagement (McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014) highlight the tensions and conflicts between individuals and communities, and the primacy of education as an equitable public good versus an individualistic private good. For example, in New York City, parents at charter schools chose schools for different reasons based on their perceived sets of choices and access to them, and Villavicencio (2013) showed how these sets of choices were smaller amongst Black and Latino low-income parents than they were for white, Asian, or affluent parents.

Likewise, the experiences of choosing schools was complicated for parents in a West Coast urban school district, wherein they revealed institutionalized race and class problems with school choice processes (André-Bechely, 2005). Advantaged families, as described by one mother in her study, learned “the strategy for playing the game” (André-Bechely, 2005, p. 292) when making choices, which ultimately reproduced the already existing schooling inequalities that many proponents of school choice policies propose to reduce. Similarly, whilst parents in New Orleans, Louisiana used more than standardized test scores to decide where to enroll their children, parental engagement in school choice processes was oriented towards individuals’ needs for specific schools, rather than for systematic changes of public
structures that might lead to decreasing district-level stratification (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012).

Ball et al. (1996) suggested that, as competitive advantages are promoted through school choice (for example, in the forms of open enrollment and charter schools), parents’ obligations and duties of choosing schools become increasingly weighted, both ideologically and in practice, toward the individual and “proactive consumer,” as “…education is subtly repositioned as a private good” (p. 110). Families engage in the selection process, and Ball et al. (1996) explain that:

Choosing a school often emerges as a confusing and complex process. In some ways the more skilled you are the more difficult it is. The more you know about schools the more apparent it is that no one school is perfect and that all schools have various strengths and weaknesses. (p. 94)

**Conclusion**

In closing, this chapter summarized school choice research that helps us understand effects of school choice policies and programs both generally and in local contexts. I described how concepts of structure, culture, and agency provide a useful organizing frame for understanding policy, and how I prioritize the importance of understanding relationships between actors and groups with varying levels of power and ability to engage in policy creation and participation (Archer, 1995; Datnow et al., 2002). I also discussed conceptual arguments related to imagining schools as communities (Cobb-Roberts et al. 2006), the ways in which social capital can both include and exclude (Putnam, 2000), and notions of accountability as they relate to school choice (Garn & Cobb, 2008), all of which guided this study. The framework explained in this chapter provides a foundation for exploring the experiences, perspectives, and actions of stakeholders in one school, SLS, and its
surrounding community in Arizona as they navigated school choice policies and programs.

In Chapter 3 I describe the methods that I used to carry out fieldwork and analyses of data in this setting.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research design, community context, methods, limitations, and my own position as the researcher in this study. To examine a mature, market-based education system from the perspective of what I came to know as the loosely-knit community around a district public school, I utilized methods that allowed me to understand why and how community members make meaning of school choice policies and how these market-based school choice policies and practices affect stakeholders “on the ground.” I created thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) from fieldnotes and memos collected during participant observation and immersion with stakeholders at one district public school, Southwest Learning Site (SLS), and its surrounding community. I collected and analyzed other qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews and documents, using multiple cycles of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) which I explain in detail below.

To answer my research questions, I used ethnographic research methods and maintained prolonged, iterative engagement with the district public school and its surrounding community for nearly two years, resulting in approximately 18 months of direct data collection. My time was spent with parents, school teachers, education administrators, and community members involved with the district public school and surrounding schools, including charter schools. Table 1 is a matrix of my research project timeline:
Table 1
Research Project Timeline

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Reflexive memo-writing</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I interacted with SLS parents, parents who chose charter schools for one or more of their children, parents who chose other schools, teachers, administrators, and SLS stakeholders who were involved with the school in different ways, either because their children had once attended, or because they were involved via AIG and their churches. Participants were selected via snowball sampling.
I engaged in qualitative data analysis concurrently with data collection, through a reflexive and reflective process of reading and re-reading fieldnotes and analytic memos and through multiple cycles of coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Fetterman, 2010; Miles et al., 2014). I triangulated conclusions drawn from the data through member checking, researching websites of schools and the district, and speaking to various people about particular topics to learn, for example, from multiple sources about the history of the school and changes that occurred. I analyzed relevant documents to compliment my qualitative data with the goal of increasing the robustness of my findings and to provide a fuller picture of my participants’ experiences in the community (Creswell, 1998; Gibton, 2016).

In all, I attended 44 meetings with stakeholders in various meetings or gatherings, which included formal meetings, informal gatherings, and one-on-one interactions that were separate from the interviews. Most school and AIG meetings lasted anywhere from two hours to six hours and were typically attended by between 10 and 60 people. I also spent approximately 70 hours with 35 stakeholders in 37 semi-structured interviews that generated 66 hours of transcriptions (two interviewees did not want to be recorded). Interviews lasted, on average, two hours. I created approximately 50 pages of fieldnotes and jottings, wrote over 110 pages of interview jottings and notes, and wrote 16 memos. I also spoke over the phone with SLS and surrounding community stakeholders periodically. I provided participants with the opportunity to review quotations and descriptions that I used in this study during the later stages of analyses. In reporting the data, I aimed to focus on “a limited set of answerable questions” (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 405) and to present the details of my methods in an explicit manner to promote cohesive analyses that attended to each of the questions. Before describing specific methodological steps I took, I describe the school and surrounding community to provide context.
Community Context

This study focuses on the participants and activities of members within the Southwest Learning Site school (hereafter SLS), which is a district-run public school in the Desert Public School System (DPSS), and its surrounding community. The names of people and specific places have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, including the names of websites. The school’s community consists of parents with children attending the school as well as others who share deep commitments to the school and its community by maintaining active affiliations with it even after their formal connections to the school have ended. For example, members taking part in school events include some alumni, retired teachers, and, particularly relevant to this study, some parents whose children used to attend the school but have moved to competing charter schools.

Also affiliated with the DPSS community and specifically with SLS is the Arizona Interfaith Group (AIG), an institution and community organizing group that works with leaders throughout Arizona to educate, strategize, and develop the capacities of institutional members (churches, schools, and unions, including but not limited to teachers unions) to foster change related to social justice. The AIG is involved in promoting traditional public schools and informing members of the community about the importance of supporting public schools, public spaces, and civic society more generally. With guidance and training support from AIG, numerous SLS and surrounding community stakeholders who are a part of this study either are, or were, active in organizing and strategically building social and political relationships to influence legislators and other policymakers. In doing so, they interacted with SLS neighbors, teachers’ groups, and church affiliates in the DPSS to teach them about Arizona’s education reforms. More specifically, they spoke about local Education Management Organizations (EMOs) and their administrators’ political
connections, the privatization and marketing of public services, the influence and activities of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) (ALEC, 2013; Anderson & Donchik, 2014), and the potential implications these issues and groups have for democracy and justice. I return to AIG and the group’s involvement with the SLS community in the findings chapters.

Arizona’s intra- and inter-district open enrollment policies have created a situation wherein students and families may choose schools and take part in public activities both inside and/or outside of the school districts and physical neighborhoods in which they live. The policies have created open flows of students into and out of adjacent districts, and a significant number of students from other districts attend SLS or nearby charter schools. As a result, Arizona’s open enrollment policies blur neighborhood boundaries that used to be delineated by school attendance boundaries.

This setting provides a context for traditional geographic boundaries such as school attendance zones to be reconfigured as community members affiliated and linked themselves, for example, through values, religion, and/or ethnicity in constructed spaces. If a person attended a public meeting for SLS or a gathering affiliated with AIG’s work in surrounding neighborhoods, I considered them to be a member of the community. Individuals at gatherings included, for example, young adults from the DPSS schools who represented themselves as activists at publicly-held accountability meetings, retirees affiliated with local church groups who volunteered their time in various capacities in the community, teachers and school leaders, some of their own students, principals and vice-principals from SLS and elsewhere in the DPSS, Spanish-speaking parents who took part in sessions using translation earpiece technology, and, in some cases, state legislators representing the district.
Finally, the community I am studying was unique because it contained a number of
groups organizing around a public school that is largely, though not entirely, middle-class.
Most parents were knowledgeable about local, state, and national education policies. SLS
had also experienced an increased entrance of low-income families, and the school was
relatively newly designated as a Title 1 school. Its test scores and performance ranking had
also declined over the past few years. Concurrently, two high-profile and “high-performing”
charter school organizations, or EMOs, opened locations near the school. Strong
Establishment and Masters Group charter schools, known for their nationally competitive
academic rankings, were both situated close to the school and surrounding community.
Strong Establishment and Masters Group charter school organizations are also discussed
further in the findings.²

During my initial time in the field, some community members were working to pass
a school bond measure. Voters had rejected similar initiatives in previous years, which
suggested declining support amongst voters for public schools. As a result, the school
provided a rich setting for an analysis of school choice reforms as they were experienced in a
community setting that, in many cases, also had generous levels of social, cultural, political,
and economic capital. During my time in the field, I tried to be attentive to how these forms
of capital might create and reproduce advantages (Ball, 1993, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau,
2000), and if and how families might use their capital to develop and promote counter-
narratives that challenged aspects of school choice policies (Harvey, 2005). Next, I describe
my methods and the steps that I took in the analyses.

² When speaking about Masters Group and Strong Establishment Schools in this study, I
have mixed up the two names in instances when it was not relevant for the analysis to
further protect participants’ and schools’ anonymity.
Methods Employed

Participant Observation

After meeting Sarah and Josh, my immersion in the community commenced with attending meetings with SLS stakeholders. These included a “Partners of Southwest Learning Site” meeting (the Parent Teacher Organization at the school), AIG meetings, door-to-door canvassing in the SLS neighborhood to support the district’s school bond override, and time spent in parents’ houses where meetings were held when I was invited. To understand structures potentially affecting the community, including the school, administration, district levels officers, and policies, I spent time as a participant observer at SLS and at a school district meeting. I had informal conversations in person or over the phone with educational leaders to build my relationships with them and to develop mutual trust prior to conducting interviews. I also used fieldnotes to help me document and understand some of the micro-level structures and cultural tensions that were apparent in the SLS community, amongst parent groups, within the AIG organizing group, and in the school. These included disagreements between some of the parents about their lack of involvement in curricular decisions that were being made by school administrators. Also, there were unintentional tensions between some staff and parents who had been at the school for a long time. Some had strong feelings about maintaining the existing culture of multi-age teaching and learning methods at the school compared to some newer staff and parents who were not as deeply committed to these methods and were less affected by different ways of teaching and learning that were being implemented. I will discuss this further in Chapter 4.

My engagement with SLS and surrounding community stakeholders extended beyond the school site into coffee shops, at the local library, and in homes. In total, I was
engaged with the community for almost two years, both formally and informally. For
example, I had lunch with parents during AIG events and had many opportunities to share
long, casual conversations with members of the community, sometimes in the parking lots of
schools, in the parking lots of churches after AIG meetings, and over the phone. I spent
time at the school where and when appropriate, sometimes informally and sometimes to
attend school functions or to meet with staff. Before spending time at the school site during
school hours, I met with the SLS principal to enquire about access. He kept me informed of
functions, activities, and meetings on the school calendar where and when it was appropriate
for me to attend. I stayed in touch with individuals when it was appropriate.

On one occasion, during an evening whilst I was at the school site, a professor led an
evening discussion with members of the school community after they had read some of his
research about high-stakes testing. Attendees took part in a passionate conversation about
the challenges faced in Arizona’s public schools alongside increased pressure from high-
stakes testing and performance standards. As another example, I attended one official
“Partners of Southwest Learning Site” meeting later in my data collection phase because I
thought that this particular meeting was helpful for understanding some of the events that
were occurring in the school related to staffing and curricular changes.

I attended and took part in, when and where appropriate, AIG education strategy
meetings that were attended by some members of the SLS community. Similar to my access
at SLS, I met with and stayed in close correspondence with the leader of AIG, and he kept
me informed of functions, activities, and meetings on the AIG calendar where and when it
was appropriate for me to participate. These AIG education strategy meetings, especially
those leading up to actions in the community with legislators, sometimes occurred twice a
week, and meetings were typically about two hours long. Other times, there were not any
meetings in a week. Weekend AIG leadership training sessions ran for five to six hours, and I attended these where possible, particularly when I knew that they would be attended by and relevant to some stakeholders from the SLS school site.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

I also personally conducted and analyzed 37 interviews with 35 participants, which added rich data beyond my fieldnotes. I interviewed two individuals twice, first early in the study and then late in the study. Interviews were transcribed “verbatim” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126) in most cases except for some side conversations that were important for building trust and increasing interviewees’ comfort levels but were not related to the study. I transcribed many interviews myself. As the quantity of my data increased, I also employed help, supported with a grant, from a professional transcriber. For the recordings that included the Spanish-speaking parents and the translator who helped me during the interviews, a Spanish-speaking transcriber also listened to the recordings to verify the accuracy of the translator.

In deciding whom I should interview and when, I employed snowball sampling as I met more parents, teachers, school leaders, and community members throughout my time in the field. I considered individuals’ affiliations when deciding whether an individual should be included as a stakeholder at either SLS or within the surrounding community. For example, in some cases, I had informal conversations with school leaders in other districts or parents who did not know and had never considered SLS, because other stakeholders introduced me to them. In these instances, although they provided helpful context about Arizona’s school choice market in general and although I took notes during and after our conversations, I did not seek to interview them formally for the study.

Many stakeholders’ affiliations overlapped. I show this below in Table 2 by noting if stakeholders were: (a) parents; (b) affiliated with SLS, either currently or previously when
their children were younger; (c) school teachers, administrators (such as principals, assistant principals, or executive administrators at a district public school or within a charter school organization, or EMO, or other staff members in or near the DPSS); (d) self-identified Spanish-speaking parents in the community at SLS; and (e) affiliated with AIG, either currently or at any point during the time of my data collection:

Table 2
Semi-Structured Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>SLS, Current or Previous</th>
<th>Teacher, Administrator, or Staff in or near the DPSS</th>
<th>Self-Identified Spanish-Speaking Parent</th>
<th>AIG, Current or Previous</th>
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<td>Alejandra</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ana</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Eleanor</td>
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<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Josh*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Lynn*</td>
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<td>Marcus</td>
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<td>Marie</td>
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<td>Marissa</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Mark</td>
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Table 2 (cont’d.)  

Semi-Structured Interview Participants

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<td>28</td>
<td>Samuel</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
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<td>Shannon</td>
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<td>Sofia</td>
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<td>Tanya</td>
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</table>

Note. The * denotes that Josh and Lynn were interviewed twice.

Table 2 shows that all interviewees were parents, although Mark was the only interviewee who did not have children in or near the DPSS. Rather, he ran an organization for parents to help them advocate for their children’s needs based on his personal experiences advocating for his children with special needs who attended schools in another district. I interviewed Mark because a parent in the DPSS suggested that I talk with him due to his advocacy work, and because he has supported parents who were fighting for their children’s needs in some of the EMOs that are relevant in this study.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of places of interviewees’ choosing, including in local coffee shops or cafés, schools, homes, public libraries, restaurants, hotels, and a work place. I conducted all interviews, except for two, in person. I prepared a broad set of questions that I wanted to ask all participants, which were guided by my research.

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3 Local coffee shops or cafés (n=12); schools (n=10); homes (n=4); public libraries (n=4); restaurants (n=2); hotels (n=2); a work place (n=1); via FaceTime (n=1); over the phone (n=1).
questions. I loosely followed the structure and order of these questions. However, I allowed intuition and the natural flow of conversations with individuals to take priority throughout our recorded time together. It was imperative to me that participants felt comfortable and, with their agreement, allowed me to record our conversations, so I wanted to do all that I could to build trust. Many conversations took an emotional turn when we discussed respondents’ children, friendships, and their own pasts, and also because we discussed the challenges they encountered when making difficult choices that affected their families. Beyond the broad set of questions listed below, I listened and encouraged individuals to expand on their thoughts and, in many cases, to share more about the feelings they openly expressed when talking about choosing schools for their children. The list of questions is in Appendix A.

To ensure that Spanish-speaking parents understood my intentions and the project, and to help answer questions that could help them decide if they wanted to take part, I also created a letter to give to parents who were interested, which I had translated into Spanish. A copy of this letter is in Appendix B, and an English version is in Appendix C. Appendices D and E provide samples of addendums that I added to the original set of questions, which, at times, I created prior to interviewing some participants based upon their backgrounds and positions in the community. For example, I asked questions that were related to an informal conversation that I had upon first meeting some of the Spanish-speaking parents (Appendix D). Additionally, in speaking with some school leaders and educational administrators, I felt that it was appropriate and helpful to understand more about the context within which the schools were started, were developing, and their plans for their particular schools’ roles and visions in the future (Appendix E).
Documentation as a Complementary Function

As another source of data, I also analyzed documents I collected at formal meetings, informal gatherings, and online, to complement the data and to help me understand the school and its surrounding community (Creswell, 1998; Gibton, 2016). These included meeting agendas, pamphlets, neighborhood voter information (for canvassing), and external readings related to educational policies and practices that AIG commonly included as prompts for discussions in meetings. In all, I collected and considered over 50 relevant documents or pages from these meetings and websites, which included school, district, and city websites (including district public schools and EMOs), to help provide a contextual picture of SLS and its surrounding community.

Memos

Memos helped to capture and facilitate my thinking and analyses (Maxwell, 2013). As I listened to and read through data, I followed Maxwell’s (2013) suggestion to, “write notes and memos on what you see or hear in your data, and develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (p. 105). The memos provided opportunities for me to think about my goals for the study, theories, and my understanding of and relationships with participants and groups in the field (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout my time in the field, I wrote informal reflective memos whenever I felt that I needed to organize my thoughts and to make points that I could return to at later stages in the project.

Similarly, I listened to my own reflective recordings that were often captured immediately upon leaving participants at meetings, gatherings, or in one-on-one settings. Sometimes, I wrote memos during or after listening to my self-recordings, which were usually recorded in my car. For example, I taped a helpful and challenging conversation with a colleague who attended an interview with me to facilitate as a translator because the three
women with whom I was meeting one day spoke Spanish. Appendix F is an excerpt from a memo about this interview, the conversation I had with my colleague afterwards in the car, and my own personal reflections. His feedback and perspectives upon leaving that interview were extremely helpful as I organized my data and considered the importance of incorporating the voices of these parents in the study. In fact, without their voices, and perhaps without my colleague’s helpful input, a significant finding about school choice policies and practices in Arizona might have been missed. As the study progressed, I found it increasingly valuable to spontaneously turn on my voice recorder, and it was in some of those moments that I captured potentially insightful thoughts before I would otherwise forget them.

**Coding**

It is important to be transparent about my perspective in relation to how I read and re-read transcripts. I viewed data through a lens that assumes that policy construction results from a complicated interplay between structures, cultures, and agency (Datnow et al., 2002), and I used this organizing frame as an entry-point for which to read and understand my data. I had ideas going into the field, especially considering that I had first met stakeholders in a way that was connected to my commentary about some EMOs near their school. With good guidance from my advisor, I worked hard to not use certain terms in the field unless stakeholders brought them up first. Two of these terms were “privatization” and “market.” Consciously trying not to inject words and concepts into conversations was very helpful, and extremely important for my perspective as a researcher as I started to meet more individuals in the community, especially those who were not concerned about EMOs or even school choice policies in general. I did not pre-develop codes.
For the practical purposes of coding my data, including my transcribed interviews, memos, and fieldnotes, I used a variety of tools including a codebook, reflexive writing in the form of jottings and memos to develop thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and first- and second-cycle coding (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Emerson et al., 2011; Fetterman, 2010; Miles et al., 2014). I also used NVivo software to organize my data and to code text. Although this software was helpful for those general purposes, I relied more on my own reflections, jottings, and hand-written fieldnotes, and an ongoing set of notes in the form of a Word document, to develop and organize codes and themes that I interpreted in the data.

First-cycle coding with the NVivo software provided a means for reading the texts and broadly highlighting what I was finding (Miles et al., 2014). As stated, I read the texts without pre-determined codes, although I do not assume that researchers are ever necessarily theory-free. My first-level codes are shown below:

- accountability, agency, change, community, contradictions, cultural capital, culture, emotions, exit, interaction and complexity of structure, culture, and agency,
- leadership, market behavior, perceptions, political, process of choosing, reasons to move schools, resistance, social capital, structure, want better or different than I had.

It quickly became clear to me that I had created more first-cycle codes than I likely needed or that could be useful without being redundant. However, because of the large amount of data that I collected, I felt that it was necessary to not limit myself in the first stages of analysis and that it would be better to focus my coding at a later point to avoid the risk of leaving out potentially useful analyses. In the second cycle of coding, I followed Miles et al.’s (2014) instructions for moving from codes to patterns or themes, by inserting “individual codes associated with their respective data chunks” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 89) into
matrices and themes after finding commonalities and conceptual links. Table 3 provides a matrix sample of a later-stage cycle of codes that I developed and used during analyses and, ultimately, whilst writing up the findings:

Table 3
*Patterns Developed From Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMOTIONALITY</strong></td>
<td>This code reflects the strong emotions that many parents, teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders displayed when talking about personal experiences with school choice policies and practices.</td>
<td>Tanya: “I’ve lost so much sleep… and anxiety! I clearly made a mistake and it has cost her… [This choice was] probably the most heart-wrenching one I’ve ever made. It was agonizing!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERPRETATIONS OF COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td>This code reflects the ways in which stakeholders spoke about the concept of community, either explicitly, or in reference to expectations for the types of alliances, ties, and affiliations that were important for them.</td>
<td>Laura: “I think that’s helped actually, just allowing people from different socioeconomic classes into that school. It used to be super white-bred, really, and that was one of the things I forgot to mention, but SLS has a much nicer blend of kids and that was appealing to me as well. And even [another district public school nearby], it’s in [city], but there’s a different blend of kids there too, more middle class, not upper middle class or upper class.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (cont’d.)
Patterns Developed From Codes

| INTERPRETATIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY | This code reflects the multitude of ways in which stakeholders spoke about the concept of accountability, either explicitly, or in reference to testing students, pressures for parents, or competition for schools in a market. | Nadia: “I think that if we could just live in a bubble at SLS and just keep everything the same, [conflict with how the principal’s communication was becoming problematic for some stakeholders] definitely wouldn’t have happened. And you can’t blame one particular thing. It could be testing, it could be the failure of the first override, it could be the need to get it up to a B, it could be the lack of funding, all of that contributes, and it’s also the parental pressure.” |

Note. The * denotes that the theme “EMOTIONALITY” was renamed as the theme “EMOTIONAL PROCESS OF CHOOSING” in a later stage of analysis.

Fieldwork Rationale

As I described in the Introduction, I came to know the school, SLS, in November of 2013 when I was contacted through email by a member of the school’s parent group, “Partners of Southwest Learning Site,” after a short piece I wrote about high-profile charter schools in Arizona was published in a scholarly journal and publicized on a blog. I met with Sarah, Josh, and his wife, Kimberly, and we talked about my findings, their experiences with EMOs, which are located near their school, and their perceptions about other educational policy issues in the district. After initial contact, I was invited to observe and participate in activities, which became the basis of a pilot study. For the pilot study, I analyzed six months of fieldnotes and documents collected through participant observation and interactions with the community, and I interviewed three parents, Sarah, Josh, and Lynn, to develop an understanding of the community members and their perspectives on the school and school choice reforms.
I expanded the study beyond the pilot by following the community for an additional year, and I expanded the interviewee pool to the list shown in Table 2. It was becoming increasingly clear that an analysis centered around the school, using data collected over a long period of time, was most appropriate for documenting the experiences and perceptions of a variety of stakeholders at SLS and in the surrounding community. Overall, the community in which the study took place had experienced significant school changes in the midst of expanding schools choice reforms. Ethnographic research in this community allowed me to explore the subtle and intricate ways in which individuals engaged with these policies.

Thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the social, cultural, political, and economic structures and actors in this community can highlight what a long-standing, deeply entrenched market-based school system looked like from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, interested community members, and policymakers. Throughout the initial pilot study phase, I had become increasingly aware that the groups of families, school community, and institution members shared an ethical commitment to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity. The AIG organization’s goal was to stand alongside the community group at SLS and the larger district to help empower people to be agents for interpreting, critically reflecting upon and shaping policies, and by encouraging the development of a counter-narrative.

Findings in this study should not be formally generalized to other settings and contexts. Yet I also argue that there is space for some data evidence to be considered via naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). First, the findings in this study may be relevant for understanding school choice in other similar contexts, such as in other cities and
states where stakeholders may have a wide range of school choice options. Lincoln and Guba (1985) speak of how naturalistic research that examines experiences and accounts can potentially fit in other situations. Second, Stake and Trumbull (1982)’s position is that, although a dominant belief that improved educational practice can only come from formal generalizations, another helpful way to think about generalizations is to acknowledge that research may be read about, reflected upon, argued, and vicariously experienced:

   The vicar is a substitute, performing a service for those not well placed to perform for themselves. The naturalistic researcher observes and records what readers are not placed to observe for themselves, but who, when reading the descriptive account, can experience vicariously the various perplexities. (Stake & Trumbull, 1982, p. 3)

Like Stake and Trumbull (1982), I agree that research has the potential to be a springboard for further examining situations in people’s own, lived contexts. SLS and surrounding community stakeholders might think about and discuss the research and, potentially, readers who were not a part of this study might internalize readings about issues that are important to them. As one example, school leaders might be able to relate with the school leaders’ experiences in this study, which, in turn, could lead them to further examine their own school settings. As the school choice movement continues to develop in the United States and beyond, such examinations can be helpful in a variety of settings and contexts.

   Overall, the findings from the research can help us better understand how school choice policies affected one local community, as well as how community organizations and members developed local understandings and interpretations of these policies and practices.
A deeper exploration of the community also provides a potential conceptual contribution by identifying and mapping the contradictions, problems, and tensions associated with the ways in which parents and community members responded to the expansion of school choice reforms.

**Limitations**

This study has limitations. I came to SLS under the auspices of Sarah, an active and involved mother at SLS who was also spending time working alongside AIG. Josh, who I met with Sarah, was the lead organizer for AIG. As described earlier, my perspectives were framed by my initial entry and by those who facilitated this entrance into the community. Therefore, beyond consciously trying to avoid using words such as “privatization” and “market” when I was with stakeholders at SLS and in the surrounding community, I also worked hard to learn from a variety of stakeholders who had different backgrounds and had different experiences with their involvement at or understanding of SLS.

Another limitation in this study is the small sample of parents with whom I was able to interview who self-identified as Spanish-speaking. A particular group of stakeholders, who lived in one neighborhood, consisted of some parents whose children rode an SLS-provided bus to the school. After school, the children had the opportunity to be dropped off at their local community center, and they were able to stay there until parents could pick them up after work. In speaking with four Spanish-speaking members of the community whose children came to school on this bus, and one additional woman who had, at one point, worked as a community outreach coordinator, I came to understand that their voices were not only important, but critical for examining the effects and assumptions of school choice policies “on the ground.” It is imperative that the voices of parents who experience
difficulties navigating school choice systems due to language barriers be further explored, and I will discuss this further in Chapter 8.

**Position as Researcher**

My position as a researcher in this ethnography is multi-faceted and, in many ways, personal. I am a former New York City public school special education teacher trained through the New York City Teaching Fellows program. In that role I started to wonder about how the relationships between schools and larger systems, where curricular materials, student support practices, and testing procedures were influenced by and, at times, easily changed by private contracts. I was concerned with the ways in which these larger systemic decisions influenced students’ lives and families, as well as communities’ experiences.

I wanted to better understand the class and race issues potentially hiding beneath the mega-narratives (Olson & Craig, 2009) about “saving” students in struggling schools. What was really going on in the stories and lives of people living out these policies? Many years later, I am a mother who is emotionally involved with navigating the complexities of Arizona’s market-based public school system as my eldest child, my daughter, recently entered elementary school and my youngest will soon be on his way to kindergarten. I am personally aware of and engaged with the complicated processes through which community members negotiate notions of public schools and the common good. I am deeply committed to this project as a mother, researcher, teacher, scholar, and community member.
CHAPTER 4
SITE CONTEXT AND EARLY MONTHS OF FIELDWORK

Introduction

This chapter focuses on descriptive findings and an analysis of data that I collected during my first months of fieldwork. During this time, I was developing relationships with parents, AIG members, and school teachers, leaders, and administrators at SLS. Beginning in the spring of 2014, I spent time, whenever I was invited, with Sarah, Josh, and other stakeholders in the community. I formally started collecting data in August. I begin by presenting some of the social, cultural, and political changes in the community that had important implications for stakeholders. My depiction of the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders follows the chronology of my time in the field. Some stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences changed over time, which helps to highlight the ways in which individual-, school-, community-, district-, and state-level politics had direct effects on stakeholders.

I first describe SLS and its surrounding community as I began to understand the site in the spring, summer, and fall of 2014. In this chapter, the analysis of Sarah, Josh, and Lynn’s experiences, who were amongst the first I came to know, provides a cornerstone that readers may return to as the chronological narrative of the story and stakeholders’ voices develop. I return to Sarah, Josh, and Lynn in later chapters, nearly two years after I developed this analysis of their experiences.

The School and Surrounding Area

The School Site and District

Around the years of my fieldwork, the Southwest Learning Site (SLS) served approximately 500 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and was one of the district’s 31 public schools (Desert Public School System, [DPSS], 2015a). Though not a
charter school, SLS was a “school of choice” that was supported by its school district. The school was opened in 1990 as a “demonstrative project” (DPSS, 2015a) that charged its principal and teachers with using the newest educational research to consider how best children learned and what made schools effective. The school was encouraged to move beyond traditional education models and to be innovative in teaching and learning methods. This school of choice closely reflected the original visions of charter schools proposed by Ray Budde (1988) and Albert Shanker (1988), who proposed an alternative school setting that could function alongside traditional public schools and that would experiment with innovative educational methods (see also Ravitch, 2010, 2011).

Students were taught in multi-age classrooms on a sprawling campus in a high-income neighborhood. Arizona’s open enrollment policies made possible a boundary-absent situation, whereupon students who lived inside, adjacent to, or outside of the school’s neighborhood could all attend. In 2015, every grade at SLS, except for the 3rd and 4th grades, had a waiting list, which meant that the school could only enroll students in those grades. SLS had become a Title I school in 2012, and nearly half (45%) of its students received free or reduced price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Table 4 provides demographic information from the 2013-2014 school year, adapted from the Common Core of Data (U.S. Department of Education, 2015):
Table 4
Southwest Learning Site (SLS) Enrollment Characteristics (2013-14 School Year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>500</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Source: CCD public school data for the 2013-2014 school year, which I have altered to protect anonymity (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

At the time, the district served approximately 26,000 students (DPSS, 2015c) and, because of open enrollment, all of its public middle schools and high schools had waitlists. Fourteen out of the 19 other elementary schools had a waitlist in at least one grade (DPSS, 2015b). These waitlists could be a signal of the district’s popularity within Arizona’s education market.

The City

The city surrounding the school site is a popular relocation site for retirees. The city’s residents have an above average median annual household income in comparison to other areas within the metropolis, and the city is a desirable location for playing golf. In 2011, the city was named by Marketliving.com as the fourth-best city in the nation to live and, according to a journalist (Beckett, 2011), was acknowledged for its high-quality schools, high rates of employment, and abundance of outdoor spaces. Deemed by the journalist as one of the best places in the United States to live, the city was also praised two years later for its high levels of residents who take part in religious activities and vote, high air quality and community involvement, low crime rates, higher than average scores in education, and high

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4 Pseudonyms are also used in this paragraph to protect anonymity.
rates of capital both socially and civically compared to other cities in the United States (Beckett, 2013). Numerous churches are dotted around the base of a beautiful desert mountain representing different religious denominations, and some of these hosted the meetings and organizing sessions with community members that I attended.

Wealth, prestige, and various forms of capital were apparent in the city and school district containing SLS. Despite being known for its high overall community wealth, there were some lower income areas within the district. The southern part of the city’s public school district had a lower median annual income, as did the areas around SLS to the south, east, and west. In informal discussions, community members commented that the city seemed to be divided, with the areas in the north having more social, cultural, political, and economic power and capital in comparison to “the south.” For example, one day during fieldwork, I canvassed with community members in a neighborhood close to SLS, and we talked with residents about the importance for a “yes” vote to approve the school district’s bond override that voters would consider. This override would specifically re-enact local taxes that the school district’s voters rejected in two previous bond overrides. As I walked and talked alongside Joy, a passionate, veteran SLS teacher, she shared her thoughts with me. In her view, the district public schools in the northern part of the city were not very reliant on the bond override since families could take money directly “from their back pockets” and put the money into their children’s schools. She felt that this reflected their lack of concern for less advantaged schools in the district, many of which were financially struggling, and she felt that this represented a large divide in the city.
High-Profile Charter Schools

Two Education Management Organizations (EMOs) oversaw Strong Establishment and Masters Group charter schools, both of which had a strong presence in and around the DPSS. The schools were particularly well known for their high academic rankings locally and nationally in the widely read, yet also criticized, *U.S. News & World Report* Best High Schools rankings (see Glass, 2014; Welner, 2015). Some local, competing EMO charter schools sat geographically inside or adjacent to neighborhoods with above average median household income levels in the DPSS, thus suggesting that Strong Establishment and Masters Group schools’ geographical locations were shaped by market considerations. As will be seen throughout my analyses, one particular Masters Group school site was a controversial subject amongst some of the stakeholders who felt that the charter school increased competition between traditional and other public schools in the district. As I described in the first chapter, before meeting anyone in the community, I conducted research on high-profile charter schools and concluded that the “highly-ranked” EMOs served a privileged demographic. One investigative reporter suggested that the charter schools likely selected even further amongst that privileged group.

Agitating

Expanding upon the introduction of the Area Interfaith Group (AIG) in the first chapter, the goal of the organization’s leaders was to train and empower leaders in local institutions and to encourage active participation at various levels of democracy. The group’s vision was of a united people in a participatory democracy (which is also, albeit, messy), and they worked to develop groups and communities aimed at organizing to advance social justice. The group consisted of individuals and institutions from a range of religious, cultural, ethnic, and economic affiliations, employee and civic groups, and social networks.
The AIG was affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national, community-organizing group that was started in 1940 by well-known organizer and writer Saul Alinsky. Alinsky and other affiliated leaders’ original work, vision, and organizing efforts have continued over the years, and the “Iron Rule” motto of the IAF remains the same: “Never do for others what they can do for themselves” (Dobson, 2002).

Dennis Shirley (1997, 2001, 2002) and Rick Warren (e.g., 2001, 2009, 2011) have studied the work of the IAF and its sister organizations, including Texas-based branches, to demonstrate the ways that institution and community organizing represents a potential revitalization of American democracy. These researchers’ descriptions of the IAF’s methods for organizing mirror those shared with me by Josh, the lead organizer of the local AIG who was also a father with children who attended, or at one time did attend, SLS. Organizers worked to bridge social capital by bringing together institutions and individuals across racial, religious, and socioeconomic lines (Putnam, 2000; Shirley, 2002).

The work across IAF’s sister organizations is rooted in like principles. Shirley’s (2002) description of a similar group in Texas is an apt description of the activities I observed in Arizona:

Leaders… were local community residents who received guidance and training from organizers and in fact waged the political fight themselves… in the community organizing work carried out in the Valley, [Texas organizer] questioned, agitated, and coached Valley residents, but the developing political work — which would soon expand to include voter registration, the upgrading of Texas’ indigent health care,

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5 Upon Alinsky’s death, new leaders worked to professionalize the role of organizers, and to build and sustain relationships with growing networks of supporting organizations (Industrial Areas Foundation, 2014).
and the equalization of school funding — was carried out by the indigenous population itself. (p. 6)

In the local AIG in Arizona, I observed Josh to be a kind, assertive, and charismatic leader who agitated, questioned, and coached residents. Leaders were intentional in conversations with individuals, whether they occurred in a one-to-one setting or in front of a large group. The following thick description adapted from my fieldnotes (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) describes one meeting which was a part of member training, where the AIG leaders provided readings for individual reading and analysis, small-group reflections, and larger-group discussions before and during one training session. The meeting details how AIG leaders engaged members of the community in unpacking the contradictions associated with market-based education policies.

The AIG conducted Leadership Training Sessions for local faith leaders, school community leaders, and engaged citizens in the area. The meetings were public and open to anyone who was interested, although members from dues-paying institutions mostly attended them. They typically lasted between two and a half to three and a half hours and were held on evenings in mid-week. Approximately 45 people attended this particular leadership training session, and the training opened, as usual, with introductions and an interfaith prayer from a local deacon. Next, Josh, the group’s leader, provided an overview and focus of the training session, and reminded the group about the readings that he had provided in previous weeks for use during the training. The list of readings included an excerpt from a chapter of Chris Lubienski and Sarah Theule Lubienski’s (2014) book, The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools. Earlier, I had provided this citation as a reference for Josh when he asked me if I had suggestions about any recent readings that I felt might be important and relevant for the organization. The excerpt
documented how public schools outperform private schools and advanced the claim that the concepts of choice and competition for schools may, “not by themselves be the best route to effective and equitable educational opportunities for all” (C. Lubinski & S. T. Lubinski, 2014, p. xviii). Josh also reminded attendees about other assigned readings, which were focused on the ideas and concepts of “abundance versus scarcity,” “economy failings and markets,” and “privatization” related to both charter schools and prisons.

Before breaking into groups to talk about the readings, one leader asked, “How do we ‘reframe’ the story of what is happening in Arizona? Since a narrative is being told for us, it is our job to critically evaluate political, economic, and cultural power and learn how to retell our story.” Next, Josh led a teaching session, where he explained to the group ideas about three spheres of society, including a public space (including governments and courts), a market space (teaching us to be good consumers), and a civic space (for example, schools and churches). A leader described how the public space is shrinking, the civic space is diminishing, and the markets are expanding. As a point leading to the reading groups, the head leader, Josh, said:

You need a civic society to teach people how to function in a healthy market. With individualism at [the] forefront of school and churches, we won’t have a healthy market — not based on trust, but based on winning and losing.

Josh further discussed that it is within humans in a society to build a common life, rather than to isolate. Next, he asked the question to the group: “What is the narrative for Arizona?” He observed that state law requires that public schools are to be appropriately and adequately funded, and he provided evidence indicating that this was no longer occurring. By connecting the economic recession to the state’s budget, Josh suggested that
the story of education has changed as, “the economy slowly claws its way back.” This “time of scarcity,” he explained, is the “dominant narrative” that is going forward.

In a later, informal discussion with Josh, I asked him how he planned and organized these leadership-training sessions. He described how part of AIG’s intention is to “agitate” citizens and institution and community leaders to move their thinking forward. For example, he asked the group what the narrative “ought” to be. The attendees next split into the three, conceptually-themed reading groups described above, and all of the topics provided as prompts were discussed for longer than the organizers of the sessions had intended, since many people were taking part and with great interest.

This description highlights what is evident in the broader data — that is, that the AIG members worked to articulate their own narrative about the importance of public institutions, partly by using research evidence and strategic planning to construct, from the “ground up” (Dumas & Anderson, 2014), a counter-narrative to dominant policies, including school choice policies, that they did not believe promoted equity and social justice issues in Arizona. Members did this by meeting consistently and intentionally, for example, by organizing political interactions with legislators, preparing public accountability forums with election candidates, talking with local citizens and neighbors, and linking local politicians and school and institution leaders with community agendas. Critical reflections and actions together, defined as praxis by Freire (1970, 2002), were important for the organization, and leaders also built relationships with and engaged with academic institutions at times, (as they did with me when we first met), to find research that might be useful to them, or to find out if there might be others in the university who could be helpful for engaging in issues, as well. As can be seen, AIG members used strategic relationships to help achieve their goals.

During my fieldwork, I observed that community members often grappled with the
tensions associated with state and local educational reforms and policies. For example, at one “accountability session” held at SLS and supported by AIG, parents, community and church members, members of the DPSS school board, and the Superintendent of the district attended. Middle school students who had practiced with AIG beforehand assertively and confidently explained to the participants that the budget crisis in Arizona was a result of public policies and choices and that it “did not just happen.” They presented data that indicated that more money was provided per prisoner in the criminal justice system than per pupil in public schools and this, these students argued, was not just. Further, they noted that Arizona’s per pupil education budget fell far below other states. The goal of the students’ stakeholder presentation was to voice their civic concerns and to expect from the leaders who were attending that they also support their efforts to promote and defend public schools.

**Ethical Commitments**

Many of the community members with whom I interacted during my first months of fieldwork shared ethical commitments to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity, and they navigated the school choice environment with emotion and love for their children at the forefront of their priorities. Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) and Holme (2002) demonstrated how commodified education markets reveal a contradiction when parents take part in schooling as a private rather than public good. That is, as Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) noted, “Conceptualizing public education as a private rather than a public good advances an understanding of democracy as a consumer commodity. Democracy itself, not just schools, is being reformed” (p. 544). I found that, even where this contradiction was evident in this community, many parents nevertheless consciously recognized and were critical of competitive tendencies in the education market. For
example, in our interview, Sarah, the mother with children at SLS who was also an active member of AIG, discussed some of these contradictions:

I’m gonna be talking about um… the way in which people see things... like, perceptions, OK? One of the reasons why I did not want to take my children to Agave [a traditional public school in the district] even though Agave is a great school in a great neighborhood with great teachers is because I knew that socially we would never be able to keep up there. And I didn’t want to.

According to Sarah, SLS had been presented with what some in the community might consider a “problem” since, “because we were such a welcoming school, look, like we want everyone to come, and everybody’s welcome kind of thing, that um, we brought in a lot of people who had kids who didn’t do well in other schools.” She said that the school also attracted a lot of Spanish-speaking families, because they felt like they belonged there:

which they do! (laugh) You know? But, as you and I both know, when you have a lot of English language learners… When you have kids, when you have a lot of special education needs, there are challenges with that and so um… I think that changed the tenor of our school, um… because you had a lot of people who didn’t like that. Because SLS had its fair share of people from the neighborhood, too… a lot of white affluent people who then started say… it was like a white flight to be honest with you. I mean… we are a Title 1 school now and we weren’t when I started. And that’s OK with me, because the teachers are the same. They have more challenges, you know, the teachers are fantastic, the spirit of that school is fantastic and my kids are learning.
Sarah sharply criticized what she saw happen when a new high-profile Strong Establishment charter school opened close to SLS and other highly respected district public schools including an elementary school close to SLS, Agave Elementary:

Well, I’ll tell you what I thought was really interesting about Strong Establishment [the charter school]… in relation to our school. I wasn’t surprised that so many people left Agave. I was a little bit surprised because Agave was like [Sarah sings this next phrase] “Ahhhhhh!” like the sun rose and set on Agave, it was this marvellous wonderful fantastic school of excellence, you know, and yet and people loved Agave, but a new thing came to town and people just, “swoosh” pulled their kids out of Agave who would never have had a problem there at the school because there’s this new shiny thing that promised private school education in a public school setting.

Sarah’s comments reflect many similar conversations that I had with other parents. Although they grappled at times with SLS’s new Title 1 status, lowered test scores, and the district’s failed override attempts, they remained ethically and passionately committed to the school, its curricular approaches as a district-supported school of choice, and its inclusiveness as a school community. AIG provided tools for organizing, and parents’ deep levels of care and emotion for their children’s schooling prompted them to engage with controversial education policies and issues in multiple ways.

Conflict, Tensions, and “Walking the Line”

Competing perspectives were also apparent. For example, one mother, Lynn, with whom I spent time during an interview, over email, and in large group meetings during 2014 and 2015, shared her experiences with her children at SLS and as a member of the SLS community. She and her husband decided to move her children to one of the competing high-profile, “high-performing” charter schools close to SLS. At the same time, Lynn and
her family were present and highly visible during canvassing in support of the bond override vote. She also continued to speak admirably of SLS, and she was knowledgeable and vocal about Arizona’s education budget issues as well as problems that she felt were associated with turning public spaces over to private investment groups.

According to Lynn, the DPSS enabled competition between its own public district schools. She shared how she was “livid” when, as an SLS parent, she was repeatedly sent information from the DPSS about a gifted program offered at a different district school:

For three years, [Desert Public School System] was sending us invitations to switch schools to Agave. “Your son has been identified as gifted. We would like to give you a tour of Agave, and have you considered having your child enrolled in the Agave program?”… DPSS was recruiting from SLS to another DPSS school! The first time I got it, I was really confused, as a new parent, I’m like, “What? OK, I understand he’s gifted, but they said I have gifted services here, why would I want to change schools?” And he loved his teacher, and he was gonna have the same teacher for three years, and it was going to be this multi-age experience that Agave didn’t offer, and you know… so, the first year I was confused, the second year I was defensive and angry. And by the third year, I was livid. Because now, their test scores dropped. SLS went from a B school to a C school. And clearly I’m not the kind of person who goes clearly on the performance rating on the school, (otherwise I would have gone with [different district public school], right, which is an A school). I went to a B school because of the environment, but they dropped to a C school and, in my mind, it felt like part of the reason they dropped to a C school, they… take the gifted kids and move them to Agave. So no wonder Agave has an A rating!
According to Lynn, the district’s actions created competition between schools. The structure and culture of the DPSS had become, to her, a place where, even within a public system, competition mattered over collaboration so much so that its own schools were competing for students. Lynn was also deeply concerned about how district policies were increasingly aimed at selling unused public school spaces to private investors. Despite her care, commitment, and love for SLS, and alongside her frustrations with the existing structure and culture of the DPSS and SLS, she explored other options available for her children. Lynn ultimately settled happily, though not without some reservations, at a “high-performing” charter school located nearby. One child was admitted and her second child was on the same school’s waitlist.

Lynn appreciated so many aspects of the school environment in her child’s new charter school setting, where class sizes were significantly smaller (one SLS math class had approximately 40 students in recent years), and she was thrilled with both the quality and quantity of her child’s learning experiences. However, Lynn also struggled with the charter school organization’s promotion of the state’s tax credit donation program and the additional donation per child, (not per family), that was marketed at the charter school:

Lynn: I would like transparency since they are using state funding. I feel like their books should be open, but I don’t know…
Amanda: … do you know… so it’s not been an issue for you? You probably…
Lynn: … well I’ve written to the Governor. (laughs)
Amanda: (laughs) You asked those questions.
Lynn: I said I would like transparency, I would like to know how much money is generated by the charter schools and where the revenue’s coming from, because going to [EMO charter school], we had to pay for the uniform, we had to pay for the
books and I’m totally OK with that, I actually think kids will treat books with more respect if they have to pay for it. Giving them away for free, I see them abuse them. That’s beside the point. Then there was a donation ask that kids pay $1,500… A donation to keep the school going. Because they don’t… because they don’t have the property tax revenue that the school district gets.

This donation program encouraged individuals to also pursue matching corporate gifts from employers on top of the tax credit program and the suggested individual student donations. The program was framed as a means for families to make up the difference between public funding and the priorities of the organization’s educational model, which, according to the organization, cost more per-student than what the organization receives from public funding.

The donations were encouraged by the EMO’s central administration since these programs were a part of all of the organization’s charter schools. Such practices blur the public/private school line because, even though parents were not paying tuition, they were taking part in private, consumer-based behaviors such as paying fees for services (Ball, 2007, 2009; Burch, 2009; Lubienski, 2009). Further, as has been documented in other research, some EMO’s board members were politically influential with state lawmakers. Our local newspaper documented conflicts-of-interests amongst EMO leaders, all of who advocated and helped to create policies and practices that financially benefited the organization and advanced free-market principles for education more generally.

Lynn and her family, whilst maintaining heartfelt support for SLS and the public school district as a whole, considered the advantages and disadvantages of different schools in their area and chose this charter school for her children’s education. Given the structural and cultural context described, it is reasonable to say that they “purchased,” as did Sarah by
choosing SLS, their children’s education in Arizona’s education market. Interestingly, Lynn and Sarah were both aware of the ways in which the district public and charter schools were competing with one another, and they both reasoned through their choices carefully and with commitment (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Yet, despite Lynn’s staunch support of public education, and her critical view toward the charter school’s financial and marketing practices, she walked the blurred line between public/private schools (e.g., Ball, 2007, 2009; Burch, 2009; Lubienski, 2009). Moreover, Lynn’s school choice decisions were very emotionally charged and also made with great love and commitment for both her children and the larger common good. Lynn was civically engaged in Arizona’s education market.

Conclusion

The first months of collecting data in the field helped me begin to understand the experiences and values that were involved in stakeholders’ actions in the community. I wanted to know more about the experiences and perceptions of other stakeholders at SLS, members within the AIG group, and the surrounding community. I also wanted to understand the socio-political and cultural tensions associated with school choice within the larger community. Specifically, this chapter focused on providing a foundational understanding of the school and its surrounding community in its various contexts, and considered closely the experiences of Sarah, Josh, and Lynn in the first year that I knew them. The analysis suggests that there were tensions in the ways stakeholders participated in schools and how they struggled with the potential contradictions between school choice policies, market-based education practices, and the public good.

6 See Garcia’s (2010) evidence and discussion about parents who choose by staying at their Arizona district public schools.
A shared ethical commitment to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity was a common link between stakeholders’ experiences and choices even though they had different experiences in Arizona’s education system. The AIG organization stood alongside the community group at SLS and the larger community to help empower people to interpret, critically reflect upon, and then engage in civic activities aimed at changing policies by providing a counter-narrative to dominant discourses that they believed were socially unsustainable and socially and economically unjust. Overall, the findings in this chapter demonstrate how community organizations and members developed local understandings and interpretations of school choice policies and practices in a mature, market-based school choice system. Upon expanding my relationships and branching out to collect data from a wider range of SLS and surrounding community stakeholders, I began to piece together how different stakeholders had experiences that were similar and, in other cases, quite different from the experiences of individuals described in this chapter.

In the next chapter, I examine how a broad range of stakeholders perceived of and engaged with SLS and its surrounding community, and how they understood school policies including, but not limited to, school choice policies. Parents’ experiences with and perceptions of school choice policies and practices revealed a complicated, nuanced, and deeply emotional process that increased pressure, highlighted contradictions, and produced stress as they chose schools for their children. I will show in the rest of the findings chapters how time, policy, and political circumstances and tensions affected stakeholders and, in some cases, altered their earlier thoughts and actions.
CHAPTER 5
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES

Introduction

In this chapter I address the first two of my three research questions. First, I describe how stakeholders in Arizona’s mature school choice market perceived and engaged with a district public school of choice (SLS) and its surrounding community, including its charter schools (most specifically Masters Group and Strong Establishment charter schools). Next, I explain how stakeholders understood school policies including, but not limited to, school choice policies. Amongst most, but not all, stakeholders, there was a strong awareness of the influence of school choice in their lives. They engaged with school choice policies and practices in a variety of ways that, as described in the previous chapter, were not without tensions. Stakeholders also had an acute awareness, in some instances, of the contradictions and problems involved with engaging with a market-based public school choice system.

Although stakeholders’ actions and perceptions changed over time, I found that there was a nearly constant presence of concern, or at least awareness, about how schools were performing in comparison to other schools nearby them, what the schools offered and did not offer in terms of curricular material and extra-curricular activities, and how these factors could affect their children. For example, stakeholders employed at district public schools or local charter schools were aware of the schools that surrounded their own, and they usually shared their own perceptions of the schools’ attractiveness, for better or worse, to other families. Such conversations ultimately helped to formulate stakeholders’ perspectives about different schools and types of schools, including those in district public school settings, charter schools, and private schools.
As I also explained in Chapter 4, stakeholders often had emotional responses to understanding, considering, and acting upon school policies and practices. These emotions deeply affected and often guided stakeholders’ engagement with SLS or surrounding schools. Their perceptions were often, but not always, in conflict with market-based theories, and their choices had the potential to exacerbate cultural tensions and families’ social relationships in their community. Many parents “walked the line” between supporting traditional public school districts and sending, or considering sending, their children to another school throughout the entirety of the study. However, just as a line can easily be drawn in the sand, it can also be washed away by waves or quickly wiped away by hands and feet. The line can then be drawn again, and such was my observation of the “line” that parents sometimes drew. Sometimes, “lines” were re-drawn in a different way, resulting in different choices, depending on the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that affected how they understood, considered, and acted when making choices about their children’s schools.

**More Complex Than Standing For or Against School Choice**

Stakeholders perceived and engaged with SLS and its surrounding community including its charter schools in a manner that was more complex than how school choice is portrayed in the partisan and often polarizing debates that dominate media and politics. In these debates, individuals are often viewed as either proponents or opponents of traditional public school systems. In these contexts, manufactured myths about public schools can proliferate (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Berliner, Glass, & Associates, 2014). I found that stakeholders rarely fit neatly into either the “proponent” or “opponent” categories. Most were indeed proponents of public school systems and, yet, their perceptions and engagement with public schooling existed on a movable continuum that allowed for flexibility and
tension, whereby they considered complex challenges facing their families and their schools. To illustrate, such challenges included, but were not limited to, deficiencies in Arizona’s required public school funding, diminishing voter support for local public schools, the state’s low graduation and college-entry rates, and increasing issues with teacher certification and retention. Most did not fault the public schools themselves. Rather, they voiced concern over policies that were hurting Arizona’s schools, and they also realized that they needed to, as parents, make immediate decisions for their children.

Whilst at first some stakeholders seemed to either strongly oppose or support school choice policies and practices, it became clear that, once I came to know community members at both SLS and within the surrounding area better, participants’ perceptions of and experiences with school choice were much more nuanced. These experiences ultimately affected their own perceptions of and engagement with schools. Recall that SLS was itself a district public school of choice. Therefore, most stakeholders who were affiliated with SLS had views and experiences that differentiated them from stakeholders in many other public school systems in the United States and beyond, especially those that are more traditionally organized.

These stakeholders were, for the most part, individuals who had social, cultural, and economic capital that enabled them to send their children to schools of choice, including reliable access to transportation to and from facilities since buses were usually not provided. As I described earlier, a crucial exception was the members of a largely Spanish-speaking population of families from an area outside of the SLS neighborhood who had children attending the school, in part, because SLS provided the bus transportation to and from a community center near their homes.
In the two years that I was engaged with the school and surrounding community, some relevant events that took place at the SLS school site included the change of a principal and the introduction of new curricular material. The superintendent of the school district also resigned. These events at the school framed stakeholders’ perceptions of the school choice process, which, in many cases, was not experienced as a single event but as an ongoing process — in fact, one that continued to evolve even as I was writing this dissertation. I expand upon this point in Chapters 6 and 7, as well as in the final discussion in Chapter 8. Still, there were some strong foundational beliefs about and strong senses of pride in SLS that were common amongst many members of the community both before and after some particular changes happened.

**Misconceptions of SLS: A District School of Choice**

SLS was commonly known as a unique public school of choice for families in the DPSS. The school offered multi-age classrooms that encouraged developmental approaches to learning and strongly supported self-directed learning. Described as “the hippie stepchild” of the district by Eleanor, a stakeholder with a long history at SLS, families were often, but not always, aware that there were frequent misconceptions about the school that permeated throughout the district and city. While the school was geographically located in a very high-income neighborhood, it was attended by students from a diverse set of socioeconomic backgrounds — and increasingly so in its later years of existence. This, along with other factors, affected stakeholders’ perceptions of and engagement with SLS. Some parents said that they would simply never choose the school because of “what they had heard.” When I asked them to describe what they had heard, they responded that there was a lack of structure, poor test scores, and a lack of preparation for high school. Others admitted that they did not like that SLS was a Title I school. For most SLS parents, though,
these perceptions and admissions caused great offense, and many passionately defended the school for its strengths, creativity, distinctiveness, diversity, and leadership preparation for young adults.

Megan is a parent whose young children were new to the school and so did not experience the major shifts that took place at SLS as described in Chapter 4. She described her love for SLS, the reoccurring misconceptions that she encounters, and her response to those who wonder why she and her husband, two doctors, would send their children to the school:

They [friends and neighbors] think it’s a school for delinquents. I couldn’t tell you how many times I have people say, “That’s the school for juvenile delinquents!” I’m like, “Well, I’m sure there are some, I’m sure there’s some everywhere.” Yeah, there’s definitely misconceptions, and that’s OK. I don’t care, honestly I don’t care. It takes all kinds, and that’s why our society functions so smoothly. I say that sarcastically! [laughter]

Other parents and teachers similarly laughed off such misconceptions. In fact, some stakeholders at the school used these types of misconceptions as opportunities to point out why they resisted increasing pressures to rank high academically or to compete with other schools. It was common for people in the school to share how much they loved SLS. For example, Mike emotionally described his feelings about SLS:

You can walk onto campus anytime you want. So, if I was able to take a day off and I wanted to see my daughter, I can do that. I don’t have to announce that, I don’t have to tell the school I am going to be there, I can just walk in and go. So there’s that, and the whole idea about teaching the whole child, and I know other schools say that, too, but you know… when my daughter was young and she wasn’t really
able to deal with the school and would crawl under a table and cry, it was OK. She wasn’t ostracized, she wasn’t put in a corner, she wasn’t told she was doing something wrong, she was allowed to do that, and then work to not do it the next time… to build her up… so she didn’t have to feel like she was an oddball because of it.

Overwhelmingly, current parents and staff members at SLS talked about the school with passion and a strong commitment to its multi-age classrooms that encouraged students’ self-direction and creative learning skills. This passion was strong, despite outsiders’ misconceptions of the school and the challenges I describe below.

The Choice to Exit

In Arizona, the state’s accountability ratings consist of letter grades that are assigned to schools based on students’ scores on state standardized tests. The assigned grade at SLS had fluctuated during the time I was in the field. Many stakeholders defended the school’s strong qualities despite a drop in the state-assigned site grades. The grade had dropped from a B to a C and then to a B again. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, some parents were conflicted with the grade drop. In addition, the school’s purpose and vision became increasingly complicated as pressures for students to score high on standardized tests increased at the district- and school-administration levels. I came to understand that this was a point of contention for some stakeholders whilst teachers, parents, and school leaders tried to hash out what it meant to actually be a school of choice. Lynn, whose viewpoints were partly described in Chapter 4, had a much harder time defending the school’s organization, actions, and test results when it was assigned a C grade. Lynn also noted, in defending SLS, that it was no surprise that the school’s grade dropped since so many parents pulled their
children out and sent them to competing schools, some of which were district public schools — which she felt was even encouraged by the district.

Nevertheless, Lynn chose to do the same for her children. She could no longer justify what she saw as problems and their potential effects on her family and she chose to send her children to an EMO charter school. So, despite supporting the school in a strong way even after leaving, she made a difficult decision that she felt worked for her children and moved them to a competing charter school. Still, Lynn was aware that her choice to exit and to move her children to a competing charter school was also problematic because of her desire to see SLS succeed in its purpose and unique vision.

Similarly, other stakeholders acknowledged the tensions that some of them faced when SLS was strategically working through ways to improve Arizona’s state-assigned site grade. Some teachers, school leaders, and parents believed that there is always space to improve and to critically consider what may and may not be working best for the students. At SLS, critical conversations were encouraged, and at the same time they sometimes proved difficult in the sense that broad engagement in decision-making at the school sometimes led to significant disagreements about “accountability,” which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7. One school stakeholder with a long history and leadership presence at SLS explained to me how the school had changed over the years whilst, concurrently, more charter school options opened around the district and city. She hinted at a significant disagreement between school stakeholders:

When I first started here… [Masters Group school] was not here. We had a very, very different population, huge different population… twelve years ago… a couple things happened during that time. We were, maybe, 20% free and reduced when I first came. A lot of educated parents, a lot of professors came here, doctors, lawyers,
highly educated… [the principal at the time] would talk about getting everyone to apply… for free and reduced… a lot of marketing to that area [the largely Spanish-speaking neighborhood outside of the school’s neighborhood]. We became full Title I. What happens when you get a lot of Title I [students]? So then, once [Masters Group school] opened, the top 20% flew out. And during this whole time it was, “Well, we need to find out why are these people leaving?” They were leaving by the droves, and why were they leaving us? People wanted the academics… even eight years ago, nine years ago, when we were trying to re-envision, there was a huge discussion as to whether even to put the word “academics” in our vision because they [some stakeholders] just didn’t want it to be that kind of school.

Families’ options to exit (Hirschman, 1970) increased over time, which differentiates this community from some others in the United States and beyond. In many other places, parents may not have a choice to consider alternative options if their assigned school faces challenges that they perceive to be negatively affecting their children. Yet, even in this type of school choice environment, parents must also have the resources, such as transportation abilities and social networks (Putnam, 2000) to learn about alternative options in the first place to even consider them at all. Still, as Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) suggest, schools as communities invariably have an element of exclusion, and the stakeholder above shows how disagreements about what the focus of the school should be can ultimately affect who might, and who might not, attend or be welcomed.

Some stakeholders, including some of those who were a part of AIG, challenged other parents’ tendency to exit when disagreements occurred, seeking stronger loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) via canvassing in neighborhoods during the election with the purposes of engaging community members in discussions about the importance of strong local public
schools. They also explained to neighbors that fleeing local public schools might cause their house property values to plummet. AIG-affiliated stakeholders strategically attempted to make connections that extended beyond community members’ immediate choices for and feelings about their own children, and they worked tirelessly to build collective community support for their local public schools and to encourage active civic engagement with their local- and state-level legislative leaders.

Having described some of the structural, socioeconomic, and cultural changes that occurred at SLS over the years of its existence, and having examined how some stakeholders perceived and engaged with the school and its surrounding community within this context, it is helpful to reconsider Sarah’s quotation in Chapter 4. There, she described how parents were tempted by the option to exit SLS and other district public schools because of “new shiny” things that offered promises to parents who were dealing with what was perhaps most precious to them (their children). Such a temptation, then, for parents and other stakeholders invested in public schooling for children potentially had high stakes. Unfortunately, these high stakes not only affected their own children as they chose other schools, but also potentially affected others’ children as SLS continued to be strained in its identity and due to increasing concerns over enrollment numbers.

Stakeholders’ Understanding of Policies

School Policies and Compromises

If individuals do not have an equal understanding of the policies that drive actions in schools, districts, and states, then agents cannot engage with schools’ policies and practices with equal awareness and the powerful responsibility that is promoted and required in a market-based school choice system. Most, although not all, stakeholders at SLS and in its surrounding community were interested in the day-to-day practices that went on at their
children’s schools. When talking with them, both staff members and parents cared about how school policies and practices, including but not limited to school choice policies, might affect their children and neighborhoods. However, numerous stakeholders did, indeed, say that they did not care about politics. A seemingly fuzzy concept, “politics” was brought up in the community in a variety of ways (more concretely by stakeholders who were affiliated with AIG, and less so by some others).

In practice, though, parents wanted to understand what was happening in their children’s schools, and many stakeholders hoped to and, in many instances, expected to be a part of schools’ decision-making processes. This was apparent for some stakeholders at both SLS and in other surrounding schools, including Masters Group and Strong Establishment charter schools. As an example, before I conducted fieldwork, some SLS parents who were concerned about the developmental appropriateness of some of the homework being assigned to children joined together as a group to read and reflect upon the research related to effects of homework for students. After having read, synthesized, and discussed what they found, the parents shared their findings with the school’s administrators, who ultimately altered the existing policy at SLS regarding the allocation of homework. Many individuals told me about this experience, and described how they were proud of their ability to help in co-constructing this policy.

In another striking example, Marissa, a mother whose children attended a Masters Group charter school and lived near SLS, described her conflicted views on some of the school’s curricular policies and practices, which she felt lacked consideration for cultures that existed outside of Western perspectives. Such practices taught, in her words, imperialism. Marissa did not teach at SLS, but she was familiar with the school and its methods. She even
described herself as a “collaborative SLS kind of teacher.” Marissa explained about the charter school:

The kids were having the Thanksgiving feast and my kids were wearing the headdress and the pilgrim hats. And like, really, who teaches Thanksgiving that way anymore, really? I just don’t understand why you would do that… it was offensive.

… They focus on Western civilization so, basically, imperialism. And I am the collaborative SLS kind of teacher, and I had this huge debate the very first year [with Masters Group stakeholders] about their classrooms because they’re all rows. And so every year I bring up the diversity question, especially when it comes to history lessons, like Westward Expansion. … So I’ve now come to, I supplement home reading with Trail of Tears, and Native American Sacajawea stories. I do what I can at home because they’re not getting another perspective at school and I realize that…

… And that’s what I worry about because the Western Expansion is a huge curriculum in a lot of the grades. They just refocus on a new aspect of Western Expansion, but Western Expansion is glorifying, basically, the colonialism of Native Americans. I try not to think on it too much because really, what school is ever… it doesn’t matter what school I put him in, no school is going to actually teach a culturally diverse curriculum… I second-guess it… but it’s a really great fit for my son. And that’s basically what I have to deal with. Everything I [don’t] believe in as an educator, but it’s really exactly what he needed, which is structure. So I continue.

Almost every year, I have conversations [with administrators to challenge the point of some of the school’s curricular frameworks].

Marissa, like other parents who struggled with some of the school-site policies and practices, challenged some of the policies and practices with which they disagreed. Even though she
did not see immediate changes, she did not give up, and she proudly stated that she continues to go into the school to challenge some aspects of how it functioned, year after year.

**Power, Influence, and Policy: “We’ve Got to Out-Charter the Charters”**

However, there were some policies that families felt were less accessible to confront, including deeply engrained school choice policies that, despite strong opposition by some individuals and groups in the state, were being implemented at an increasingly fast pace. Consider Matthew, a staunch proponent of Arizona’s school choice system, and an EMO administrator with ties to policymakers. He acknowledged that there have been documented abuses of power, and he recognized the need for improvement based on some unfortunate lessons learnt from past mistakes. However, he also felt strongly that:

> The tectonic shifts in education have only just begun. We have really no idea where it’s all gonna land, and if school choice remains, it will never fully stop. Right? We’ll plateau on some things but I don’t think, it’s like that with any business.

Matthew described Arizona’s market-based school system and its associated policies as follows:

> Longest standing. Twenty years now? Which is still not a lot of time… And you know the problem is freedom. People do good things with freedom and they do really ugly things with freedom. Some people use freedom in the education marketplace to launder money. Some of them use it to, you know, use a funding system to make sure they and their immediate family members all have jobs. You know? Um, and some get into it with really big hearts but not a whole lot of, um, skill! (Laugh.) And I think that, like any truly market-based system, it can be really nerve-wracking, especially when we’re talking about certain kids being caught up in
the bad ones, and parents can be bamboozled, you know? But I don’t think that
that’s an argument against the market. I think that is one of the things that, in this
world that we live in, you know, the bureaucrat can’t save us from any, every bad
mistake that we’ll make, and every bad product that will be built, and every moment
that we may be bamboozled by someone selling snake oil. But over time, um, and
you’re seeing this in Arizona, I mean the charter options today for moms and dads in
just about every neighborhood, are better than they were twenty years ago, certainly
better than they were ten years ago. … And I think over the next ten to twenty years,
you’re going to see a lot of these schools not be able to compete with those that are
really upping the game, the bar.

From Matthew’s perspective, charter schools were not going anywhere and, in fact, public
schools were in the process of being “revolutionized.” Yet, by equating poor schools with
bad products, Matthew also minimized the degree to which children’s education can be
harmed by schools that are the result of some people “selling snake oil” and who sometimes
do “ugly things with freedom.” Also, although bureaucrats cannot save people from “every
bad product,” governments arguably have a role to protect children and families.

Matthew’s view on the future for Arizona’s school choice market was different from
many parents whose children were not attending charter schools and who had been a part
of, or had observed, the traditional public schools in Arizona changing over time. Many
stakeholders, and not only those at district public schools, were concerned with potential
conflict-of-interest issues related to politicians’ and EMO administrators’ close relationships
with each other, as well as the business and market-based language that drove school choice
leaders’ promotion of schooling, such as was described by Matthew. In their opinions, such
ideological standpoints were largely responsible for the extraction of resources from
traditional public schools and for attracting advantaged students, which thus resulted in more challenges for Arizona’s district public schools.

There were concerning and noticeable differences in how parents participated in school choice, that is, between parents with relatively more social, cultural, and economic capital and those with less. Parents who had a surplus of social capital and networking resources, as well as financial savings, were more likely able to take part in Arizona’s school choice programs compared to those who may not have the same availability and access to resources. There were certainly marginalized voices within the community, and some parents did not know what a charter school even was, or if their child was attending one. In practice, parents who knew more about the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, tax credit programs, and open enrollment options for district public schools and charter schools were the parents who were more likely to use them. This is problematic since the school choice policies and practices were not being utilized in a way that equally benefited all of Arizona’s students, even if this was the often-spoken aim.

Here, I contrast Matthew’s view and position as an EMO leader shared above with Josh’s view and position as the AIG institution and community organizing group leader. He provided a strong critique of school choice policies and practices in Arizona and their effects on district public schools. Below, he describes how one district public school’s building needed construction improvements and updates:

And you know, as long as the schools are deprived of the resources it needs to take care of its facilities, and they see us in a new facility [SLS had, in the past, been completely rebuilt on a new campus] and they’re not… you’re gonna create this conflict in the district. And that’s a product of the simple scarcity. So you keep starving the schools, you’re gonna see all that. The charters love that type of thing. I mean,
that’s just creating an environment for them to pop in and continue to be so predatory… This really points out the fragility of institutional life. Is this a place where people come and learn how to collectively work together, exercise citizenship, a place for children to learn this through the adults in their lives doing it, or is this just becoming a service center and a space for an educational product? Now, developing a culture of that kind of citizenship takes some time to inculcate and it can be obliterated very quickly if you bring in a strong market element. And, if you have leadership that doesn’t understand the value of that type of culture, you can decimate it. And, you know, it can be very precarious to the school environments right now because they don’t know how to make sense of the lobby pressures. I don’t think they understand how decisions are being made. So they buy into this narrative that, “We’ve got to market ourselves and we’ve got to out-charter the charters.”

These competing interpretations of how school choice policies might affect schools and students in Arizona were at the center of many disagreements that I observed throughout my two years in the community. For example, at a public accountability meeting, where AIG members invited elected legislative political representatives, the elected state superintendent of education, and the superintendent of a local school district to sit on a panel and answer questions, intense debates ensued around a controversial bill. Proposition 123, which was narrowly passed by voters, settled at 72% of the required amount of court-ordered funding for Arizona’s schools. The funds would be distributed to both district public schools and charter schools. One local political representative voiced major concerns about this allocation of funding because of documented cases of fraud and abuse at charter schools, and she publicly demanded that the state superintendent of education require the
Department of Education keep the track of these funds. The state superintendent said, “I support parental choice… that being said… our task is to make sure the money gets to where it should and make sure there’s no fraud.”

Nevertheless, some stakeholders viewed these declarations that reassured transparency with weariness and distrust for policymakers and politicians, and as statements that masked hidden, opportunistic intentions to financially support advantaged groups of individuals through the advancement of charter school organizations over public school students. For example, some stakeholders described how they opposed Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) which, as described earlier, would serve in a way similar to a checking account whereby students could receive state funding that would have gone to their public school for their personal use at, for example, private schools of their choosing and online learning schools. Their concerns were related to how these ESAs might be used by more economically advantaged families, which would take money away from schools where funding was more seriously needed. A school superintendent pointed out that, whilst the ESAs that were being proposed for expansion during my time in the field could provide more parental choice for families, they also had the effect of lowering the enrollment of otherwise successful public schools. This, he said, “creates a burden” that falls onto the district public schools. In discussing the topic of Arizona’s public and private school tax credit donation programs and the proposed ESAs, Joan, a mother who was considering a number of schools for her son, said:⁷

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⁷ Joan speaks here of Arizona’s existing tax credit programs, which Welner (2008) calls neovouchers, and they are a different iteration of voucher-like programs. Arizona’s private school tax credit program allows married taxpayers to donate nearly $3,000 per year of joint-filed tax money to a school tuition organization that then sponsors children to attend private schools. Although parents cannot donate to their own children directly, grandparents, neighbors, and friends can. At the end of the year, donators receive a 100% tax credit. In
My opinion is, if you want to send your child to private school, that’s well and good, do it, if you can afford it. If you can’t really afford it, then don’t go asking other citizens of the state to help fund your child’s private education. That money should go to the state coffers to do whatever the state feels is best. And hopefully some of that money gets put into [a neighbor’s] school or other kids’ schools, and especially kids [whose parents] can’t afford to take the time to drive their kids to private school or whatever. It rubs me… it just doesn’t sit right with me.

One participant in the panel even said to me after the meeting that he was increasingly concerned that further expanding tax credit programs and ESAs could even incentivize charter schools in Arizona to become private schools. As private schools, they could more easily exclude certain students and receive even more money through tuition that is supplied by ESAs that would otherwise be used in public schools. Such a concern was perhaps not far-fetched. Arizona already has well-established and widely used programs that allow for funding to follow students to the district public, public charter, private non-religious, or private religious schools of families’ choosing.

No matter where stakeholders positioned themselves along the continuum of support for or against expanding school choice policies and programs, though, individuals at SLS or at other competing schools all acknowledged how school choice could be beneficial for some people, even if they also were not entirely happy with increasing options for families to disengage with local public schools by exiting. One father said:

I think that charters do best when they don’t try to replace the district schools. My wife’s school [his wife teaches at a charter school] fills a niche. They don’t have a lot of

the 2014 tax-year, 133,300 Arizonans claimed $87.1 million worth of credits through private-school tax credit programs alone (Wiles, 2016).
students. They cap it at 300 students because that’s all they can handle, but they’re serving a population of kids that aren’t being served adequately by the district…

That’s because traditional schools still have a different culture, uh, that’s geared more around the sports programs and that kind of stuff… and so her school I think really serves a niche for kids that were kind of like us in the 80s. We were these oddballs that went to teenage nightclubs and dressed in black and dyed our hair and pierced our ears, and really were other. We didn’t fit in.

Another parent whose child attended SLS in the past noted:

> We [adult siblings] were together the other night because my parents are sick and we were trying, half of them are Democrats, half of them are Republicans, and I say to my sister, “How did you end up like this?” We were having a political talk, but everybody has a different style, lifestyle, makes different choices, has different habits. And, I think what is great about now is that we can accommodate a lot of that. Not everybody has to go to the same cookie cutter place. That to me is really what is magnificent about schools versus charter schools versus parochial, is that there is choice.

“The Game of Education in This Country”

For some stakeholders, these conversations and debates were less familiar, if not completely unknown, and were not an area of concern. When asked about some of Arizona’s controversial school choice policies, some made comments suggesting that they did not care about “politics” nor did they like to “be political.” In these cases, parents’ foci of attention were on their child’s school site. This was true for Alejandra, a mother with children at SLS. The first thing that she shared with me when we discussed choosing schools for her children was how unwelcoming some front desk staff were at another public
school that she had visited. This was unacceptable, in her mind, and such an apparent lack of professionalism mattered in a significant way to her. On the contrary, she really liked the warmth that she felt upon entering SLS for a tour, and she thus put her son on a waiting list. When he was taken off the waiting list and was offered a place in the school, she enrolled him immediately.

At first, she did not like that uniforms were not required at the school. She preferred a structure where her children wore uniforms, and initially she felt that their days should be more conservatively structured. However, Alejandra said that, over time, she came to love SLS as a school of choice and she honored and greatly respected its policies and practices. She said that she learned to really appreciate the creative ways in which her daughter was able to express herself. Alejandra happily and proudly expressed that her daughter was free to share her ideas, have critical thinking opportunities, and make decisions as a participant in the school. One time, she said, she went to visit her son in his classroom. She could not find him in the room. His teacher suggested that she look under some chairs, and there she found him comfortably tucked up and reading. This, she felt, was wonderful and important, even though she admitted that such practices shocked her at first. In our time talking, she only mentioned school choice policies if I brought them up and asked her about her thoughts on them, and she referred, always, back to what was happening inside of the school.

Alejandra is Central American, and a Spanish-speaking and English-speaking mother. She said that the key, for both her and her American husband, especially because she felt that she had to learn the culture of schooling in the United States, was to “learn the system.” In one conversation, she described what she meant about “the system.” Alejandra said that she did not want one of her children to be in a particular class for a subject in the following
grade. So, she worked hard over the summer to collect books and to practice and prepare with her child to test into the grade above her child’s assigned year, a possibility that SLS allowed. Her child passed into the next grade for the subject of concern and, reflecting upon this, Alejandra said, “Thank God we have resources.”

In saying “Thank God we have resources,” she was referring to also paying for a tutoring program. In describing these steps that she took, Alejandra said that she felt that it was very important to help improve access for some of the other Spanish-speaking families at the school. She thought that it could be helpful for the administration at SLS to hold a meeting at the beginning of the school year to explain “the game of education in this country.” She said that this game, which she, too, had the responsibility to learn, was crucial for her children’s success in school, especially because she felt that she had to often read between the lines when navigating her children’s schooling.

As for her thoughts on children who attend charter schools, Alejandra said, “You have kids of certain social levels and some go to the [charter] school instead of the whole community. Then public schools are filled with students with no transportation.” Alejandra said, “I am Hispanic and I want my kids in a more culturally diverse setting.”

Overwhelmingly, Alejandra’s love, passion, time, and resources were spent in addressing concerns and priorities that she had at the school where her children attended.

**Marginalized Voices**

Not all parents had equal levels of knowledge about state-level or school-level policies and practices. All parents, though, were open to share their voices and experiences. The Spanish-speaking, English language learning parents whose children were provided transportation to school on the bus provided by SLS did face obstacles and barriers navigating the school system and learning about school and state-level policies and practices.
They shared how these obstacles were sometimes hurtful for them, and that they often felt misunderstood or treated differently than other parents at SLS and other district schools, even if unintentionally. Ana, one mother with whom I spoke with the help of a translator, shared that her son, who was in a high school located in the DPSS, had to retake a course to graduate because of a mistake on the school’s part. Yet, she was responsible for paying for the tutoring required for her son and, despite what she felt was the injustice of the situation, she paid because the stakes were so immediately high:

Translator: She feels that they help the people that speak their language a little bit more, so the more English-speaking students.

Ana (via translator): It’s not that they ignore us. It’s not that they’re leaving us behind but that’s the feeling. But it’s not the same, we feel different. That it’s not true is another conversation, but I sense that. I sense that I feel different. So the counselor [at her son’s high school] doesn’t really communicate with me a lot. He tells me one thing and then he tells me another thing and then he tells me something, but he sends me something else.

Amanda: Does he speak Spanish?

Ana (via translator): No, but for example, what I didn’t like was, there’s not really a good communication. He tells me one thing, he tells me that my child needs to…

(Translator: I think she said this.)

Ana (via translator): … has a curriculum that he needs to do, but that they sign him up for different classes in the summer. So they put him in another class that he already took, but then the class that he really needs, they didn’t put him in and now I have to pay for it. This is nonsense. This is so simple.
Her difficulty in communicating with the staff, and the school's inability to effectively communicate with her, was problematic:

Ana (via translator): I couldn’t fix anything. My son needed to pay $150 for one week and instead of paying my rent, I paid that for him to go to school in a sense because I value education. And at the same time, it was difficult but it was a sacrifice that I needed to do… Because what the system did was, they gave him, he had passed an algebra course, but they actually gave him credit for another course. And it’s as if they passed him for this, but they gave him, they made an error and they gave him credit for another course, so yes.

Amanda: Were you able to talk to anybody at the school about the error?

Ana (via translator): Yes, but nobody attended well to me. They didn’t accommodate me because the person who deals with the people who speak Spanish comes at 11 a.m. and since I’m at work, I can’t take breaks and be on my phone to call. There was no response in a sense from the school, and they told my son that he needed to take this other course and there was nothing that could be done.

My conversations with Ana, Adelina, and Sofía, Spanish-speaking mothers with children at SLS, took place after an English language class for parents that they were attending in the afternoon at SLS. Our conversations ended up taking very different directions than the conversations that I had with other SLS stakeholders. Ana, Adelina, and Sofía’s concerns were distinctly different and more immediate than most other parents’. For example, they asked me to explain to them what the differences were between the various schools in the area. They did not know much about charter schools, and some did not know what a charter school was. One mother wondered if SLS, the school where their children were
enrolled, was a charter school, private school, or public school. In the excerpt below, I have withheld the mothers’ pseudonyms intentionally to protect anonymity:

Amanda: … If somebody said to you, what could the school do for you?

Mother: To pay attention to us as Hispanics, to listen to us. I’ve always sensed that. I don’t know about both of you, because us that we don’t speak English, they see us different. Everybody feels like that.

Mother: We don’t know if it’s only in terms of programming at the school.

(Translator: “But she’s saying that that’s how we’re all viewed.”)

Ana: One example, when my son was going to leave here and go to high school, there’s a program where they help the girls to go to high school, and I never knew that. And I only learned when my son was already in high school and he’s the one who informed me later on. And my son told me [not in a punitive way], “I’m telling you this so you won’t make the same error that you made with me.” For his sister, for my other two daughters.

Amanda: Your son sounds awesome.

Here, Ana described being lovingly and tenderly informed by her son about support that his younger sisters could receive to help them transition to high school and take the courses that they needed to take. In her explanation, he shared this important information with her to help the family avoid the problems he had, which occurred, in Ana’s perspective, because of the school’s mistakes and a lack of effective communication or concern for her and her family.

Ana shared another way in which she felt culturally misunderstood. However, she also knew that her son was determined to succeed regardless of the obstacles that they faced as a family:
Ana (via translator): Because I don’t speak very good English I can’t help him with his homework. It makes it very difficult for me to help my child in his academics. And because the way I learned… so here it's a different method, so I don't know how to help my child because I learned a different way. If I teach him what I know, I'll confuse him.

Translator: She’s saying that she took some classes at the university, but the problem is, “For me, I can’t explain myself, but he wants to keep going. He wants to be a programmer or a dentist,” (her oldest child). “And he tells me that if I can’t help him, he will find a way.”

As can be seen, Ana’s understanding of school policies and ability to engage were quite different than those of many of the parents in the community who had more access to knowledge through networking, transportation, finances, and other forms of capital. The Spanish-speaking parents’ access to what was happening in SLS and understanding of how the school’s policies and practices worked were further diminished when a very caring, well-loved community specialist left her job to pursue other work. When this specialist worked at the school, she organized gatherings at the community center near the Spanish-speaking parents’ homes. Here, parents were able to gather, build friendships or otherwise get to know one another, eat, and celebrate their lives and common culture together.

When the community specialist left her position, Ron was hired. He was well-liked by people at the school, as he had a very welcoming, charismatic, and warm personality. It was clear to me that he was kind and hard-working. Ron was always spending his time getting to know students and families in the community. He was also sharply aware of and spoke with me about underlying class and race issues that existed in the United States. The Spanish-speaking parents with whom I spoke in the English class described him as a very
nice man. However, Ron’s inability to speak Spanish was a major barrier for them. Whether it was an oversight or a lack of consideration on the part of those who hired Ron for the position, this did not go unnoticed by the Spanish-speaking members of the community. While they did not blame him, they also needed the services that a bilingual community specialist could provide.

Ron also understood that the language barrier was problematic, and he worked in his first year to get to know families alongside translators, and to break down barriers in other ways. His concern for students and families was recognized, as others spoke of him fondly, and people appreciated how he took time to get to know their children. This language barrier, however, had consequences and created yet another challenge for Spanish-speaking parents. Describing the previous community specialist’s gatherings and Ron in his new position, one mother said:

(via translator): Because we can’t drive or we don’t have cars and the only time to gather here is for the English classes. A lot of us don’t gather anymore. Well where we live, in the [community center], is where she [community specialist] did the gatherings and it was really nice because the kids would be in the clubs and we would join. Amanda: And so at the gatherings, you’d talk about things at the school, is that right? (via translator): Yes. It was in a sense an orientation of everything that was going on at the school. (via translator): For me, [she] was the best because she would explain everything to us in terms of grades and all the bureaucracy of the school. …Well it’s not the same with Ron because the language is different and also he comes in and asks us how are you doing, do you need anything, which is great, and that is the extent of the
relationship. But we can’t really build the relationship with him because the language is not there.

In Chapter 8, I discuss some implications of these types of barriers that highlight how parents do not all have equal access to school policies, including school choice policies, nor do they all feel that they can express their voices effectively in instances of injustice. One mother, who spoke Spanish and who gathered with mothers who lived near the community center that I described above, shared with me that some parents from that area did not want to publicly protest when the principal ended up resigning — but not because they did not support the principal. Rather, they wanted him to stay, but felt silenced because they did not want to draw attention to themselves. Their experiences corresponded with Alejandra’s statement about the necessity of learning how the “game of education in this country” works. This was a critical priority for parents, in Alejandra’s and Ana’s opinions, and they were aware of barriers. In the face of the frustration that some parents experienced, Ana made a point to tell me, at the end of one of the meetings and as her eyes filled up with tears, “Despite all the politics… we’re happy that our children are better off than us.”

**Conclusion**

The analysis in this chapter highlights the social, cultural, economic, and political factors that drove stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences with school choice policies and programs. I also addressed the dominant assumption from many proponents of market-based programs that all families have equal access to choice within a district. In summary, it is crucially important to challenge such assumptions, and to ensure that parents whose voices may be marginalized are given careful attention and provided opportunities to engage with public education’s policies and programs, especially as public schools become more customer-oriented.
In Chapters 6 and 7, I explain how there were two key influences on families’ choices. These were related to how stakeholders understood and prioritized the notion of “community,” and their ideas about “accountability.” I also concentrate on one area that has been understudied in the literature and political debates surrounding school choice policies and practices. I examine the ways in which stakeholders understood and coped with what I characterize as the pressures of parental accountability fostered by the public school choice market.
CHAPTER 6
IMAGINING SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES IN A SCHOOL CHOICE MARKET

Introduction

In this chapter I analyze the factors that influenced families’ school choices that were specifically related to their understandings of “community.” As I spent time with community members and other stakeholders, I began to understand that they often interpreted and acted upon notions of “community” in their school choice actions. Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) suggest that people’s ideas and attitudes about schools and community life beyond individual family life can be fraught with contradictions whereby there exists a “rhetoric of inclusion, reality of exclusion” (p. 18). On the other hand, proponents of school choice often valorize the potential for school choice policies and programs such as open enrollment to provide inclusive opportunities for students. In these cases, students who might otherwise not have opportunities to join particular school communities because they do not live in the neighborhood might enroll in schools outside of their geographical boundaries, thus affecting the demographic makeup of students and parents’ potential experiences with their notions of community.

Stakeholders imagined and differently prioritized their views on schools as communities during their choice processes. They did so in diverse ways and, in some cases, they were also keenly aware that their personal choices were in tension with what they felt was good for “the collective.” Some parents understood that their individual choices had individual consequences. For example, one mother stated, “Any choice you make is a loss.” She sensed that choices she makes at one point in time may entail sacrifices that include removing yourself from certain groups of people and joining others with possibly different
perspectives about schools, children, learning, teaching, and even society as a whole. Other stakeholders also understood that school choice policies and programs can have both positive and negative effects for public schools and other people’s children, and many were also aware that school choice policies can have segregating effects and facilitate overt self-sorting based on socioeconomic status.

My analysis highlights how stakeholders perceived “community” broadly, in sometimes provocative and complicated ways. I also consider how, as parents’ choices unfolded, individual and group perceptions and actions proved to be, at times, seriously problematic in that they revealed usually subtle but sometimes blatant contradictions associated with social equity. In the final chapter of this study, Chapter 8, I conclude that this complex set of factors and influences that affected families’ choices did not fit into any simple categories of right versus wrong or good versus bad.

Rather, I am compelled to share the stories of stakeholders in this school and surrounding community to show how the experiences of negotiating school choice policies, and policies’ influences on parents, teachers, school leaders, education administrators, and other invested stakeholders as they made choices and acted were nuanced, fluid, and consequential. Further, though many parents were aware of the potential effects of school choice programs for other people’s children, their focus on their own children usually trumped all other factors when making choices. In addition, families’ choices did not necessarily end when they enrolled their children into a school, nor did the choice process itself typically end. Instead, many parents continually questioned, re-evaluated, and wrestled with their choices, sometimes to the effect of changing their children’s schools numerous times over a short period.
Perspectives on How People Imagine Schools as Communities

In this section, I explain how families’ choices were often driven by stakeholders’ individual and, at times, collective notions of “community.” To display this complex interaction of influences amongst community members, I provide examples that reflect how stakeholders imagined schools in ways that were also consistent with the four theories of schools as imagined communities as identified by Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006): functionalist, materialist, opportunistic, and institutional-identity perspectives. Here, I show how all four theories were observable as people experienced and acted upon schooling in this market-based school choice system.

As described earlier, the notion of “community” can be complicated by an assortment of factors, all of which depend upon a person’s own set of experiences and perceptions (e.g., Ball et al., 1996; Jennings, 2010). I viewed the following data through a lens that assumes that notions of identity and affiliation are socially constructed, or imagined, through strong cultural symbols, beliefs, and affinities (Anderson, 2006). To point out the strong beliefs and affinities that drove some stakeholders, especially those involved with AIG, the following is an excerpt from one AIG community gathering. A religious leader in the community stood before the audience before beginning the session and passionately called the attendees to collective attention and action. Individuals at this meeting cared about public spaces and, most relevant for this study, public education, in a way that deeply connected them communally and socially for the very serious purpose of creating a better space for all of Arizona’s inhabitants:

Deacon Patty: Perhaps we can all find some reassurance in the words of Pope Francis who told our Congress last fall, “You are called to defend and preserve the
dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good. For this is the chief aim of all politics.” So, AIG, are we ready?

Audience members: (Cheers from audience).

Deacon Patty: Let us now (start?) the process of reimagining Arizona. Let us apply our creativity and resources to the task, and let us bring others into this great work.

We may yet again bend the arc of history. Let us begin.

**Functionalist Perspective: “We Don’t Want Them to Grow up in the Bubble”**

Some stakeholders, though, did not feel like they needed to revolutionize or even to change very much about the schools for their children in the ways that Deacon Patty summoned some individuals above to engage in civic action to promote policies that were more equitable. Admittedly, a majority of stakeholders with whom I spent time held strong feelings about the impact and power of schools for their children. Some, though, were not as concerned about the specific school and district structures that determined the rules, regulations, and practices at SLS or other schools. Rather, they trusted their chosen school's leaders and they acted out their notion of communal life independently of how individual schools were functioning.

Luna, for example, a mother who had recently returned to Arizona with her family after living in her birth country in Central America, was not particularly concerned with the way SLS was run or what type of school it was (for example, a charter school, traditional public school, or district public school of choice). Nor was she troubled by how students performed on standardized tests at SLS in comparison to students in the schools around it. Although Luna had the financial resources to drive her children to public, charter, or private schools outside of her neighborhood, she chose SLS for her children. She wanted to send
her children somewhere close to their home, where they could learn, socialize, and respect their teachers. She explains:

When we come back here [from living outside of Arizona], we knew that we were living in the DPSS area… but we decided first we wanted a school that it was close by because I have four kids. Second one, I wanted the four of them in the same one, that was important for me, um, and to be honest, by now, I really don’t mind, you know, those contests that they do. You know, I have a friend who she goes to… a public [web]page, you can see how many stars and what’s the level of the school where they do the test.

Amanda: The grades [Arizona’s state-assigned school grading system].

Luna: I don’t do that. I don’t mind. It could be the worst school. Because I believe that they are, you know, the schools now, there are good teachers and there are bad teachers. There are enthusiastic teachers who are passionate like [teacher at a school in Central America whom she had told me about] and there will be teachers that they [her children] hated, and they try to retire as soon as they can, and get something of the school… It’s sad but there are some teachers that they just want to create problems… And so I see that… at all levels! Even it’s amazing, in private schools they have that.

For Luna, the functional role of school was to be a place where her children just needed to go to learn and prepare for life and the society around them. She did not have a problem with exposing her children to experiences like those they might come across when they become adults, such as getting along with difficult bosses or unkind co-workers, and co-existing with people who come from a mix of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures.
Luna shared how shortly after enrolling her children at SLS some people in her affluent community told her, “… that school is just for maids and gardeners, workers to leave their kids there.” When I asked her if she could talk more about that, she said, “I didn’t see that! It’s kind of a mix.” In conveying how she did not want her family to have a small perspective of the world, Luna completed the statement by describing how she had visited some private schools the area. This is, in her words, what she saw and felt:

We visited and then I said, um, but it’s… we don’t want them to grow up in the bubble. And we can see that there are kids who are, in kindergarten, in the bubble. And I lived that before in [previous home outside of Arizona]. So we didn’t want to do that. Because in [previous home outside of Arizona] it is the same thing, there are the rich kids, that they have their kind of a club… So we are different and we know how we are different. And we have a different perspective of life and they are still the same person [even with different backgrounds] and they know!

Exposing her children to life outside of “the bubble” was the most important factor for Luna. For her, she did not mind so much where her children went to school, or even what the quality of their classroom experiences was, if they learned larger life lessons that could help them to function alongside other people in life, no matter what circumstances they might find themselves in. Luna felt that these lessons, and the interactions with others and the dreams that her children pursued, were more important than anything else. SLS, and schools more generally, functionally helped to serve Luna’s family toward living that goal.

**Materialist Perspective**

In Arizona’s market-based school choice system, families’ choices could, at times, break down barriers between neighborhoods and amongst individuals with different socioeconomic backgrounds yet at the same time, create other, perhaps less obvious, social
and cultural boundaries and walls. Parents imagined their “community” in different ways than those who might consider a community to be a place where they live with other people whose children all attend the same neighborhood public school and live in the same block of houses or zip code. In other words, school boundaries in Arizona were not just the ones set by districts based on geography. The boundaries that I observed were usually more subtle, but often just as, if not more, powerful because, rather than being regulated and determined by public leaders in an institutionalized manner, they were “imagined” in complicated, competitive, market-driven, and sometimes veiled ways.

SLS and other schools in the DPSS area could sometimes be “arenas for conflict over the distribution of resources (both tangible and intangible) in society” (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006, p. 13). Some district school stakeholders shared that they had heard comments in their respective schools such as, “I feel like we’re letting anyone in,” or “Isn’t that where the bad kids go?” One district public school was contradictorily described by a stakeholder as “a community-based school” with “very insider/outside status.” SLS, though, provided a multi-age learning experience, which was commonly understood by those within the school to be aligned with the Montessori style of teaching. While some surrounding community stakeholders who were not a part of SLS knew this and shared this view, others believed that SLS was the place that “bad” kids were sent, and therefore, not a place where they would choose to send their own children.

However, when talking about the DPSS schools or SLS specifically, few stakeholders explicitly mentioned how, compared to other nearby public schools, a greater number of students who lived in poverty and received free and reduced-fee lunches attended SLS. An exception was Shannon, a mother whose young child tried out a number of schools in the area before she finally decided to homeschool him, who commented on how she saw a lack
of school boundaries to be problematic for a “community.” Schools, for her, were opportunities for families to build communities, and might be better if they were focused only upon the children who lived within a specified border. Her thoughts about students’ access to schools via open enrollment reveals an undercurrent of socioeconomic and cultural tensions that occasionally surfaced. Shannon said:

I understand the concept in the beginning of what open enrollment was supposed to do, but when you look about how SLS is in the Desert neighborhood yet it’s a Title I school … and you’ve got all these people from miles away bringing them up to this neighborhood because that’s supposed to benefit them, but we’ve lost our sense of community now. So everybody who goes to your school, they don’t even live in your neighborhood… Why can’t we keep that money in the neighborhoods where it belongs? That’s what makes Agave school such a good school now, is that so much family money is still being put into that school. Why not make you move to that neighborhood for that reason? Our property taxes are higher for that reason and, therefore, keep the government money in the neighborhoods and in the schools where it belongs. And then those schools are building stronger communities around themselves as well.

Shannon’s account does not consider how schools in the different neighborhoods received different amounts of money, through government funding, local funding, and individual donations. In this situation, some of the schools in the district raised a particularly large amount of money that was allocated just for their own schools and, so, they were able to provide more resources.
Opportunistic Perspective: “It’s Not Like One Size Fits All”

As described previously, many members affiliated with SLS loved the school for its alternative model. In a similar way, stakeholders who were associated with “competing” charter schools felt the same way about their particular school models. Within the DPSS, increasing numbers of traditional and other district public schools were known by locals for their individual identities, or for their “niches.” A competitive school choice model, indeed, encourages school affiliates to engage in finding their own, unique identity. This made community-building a “practical occasion,” (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006, p. 15) to gather with others who had similar interests, beliefs and, as described by one EMO leader, similar values.

In some ways, this phenomenon created another interesting contradiction. With schools promoting “niche” identities, it is also true that schools might have the ability to more easily justify an attitude of, “Love it or leave it” amongst stakeholders, including not only parents, but school leaders and teachers, too. According to the experiences of some community members, the exit option that this school choice market provided allowed school personnel and parents to freely and, even proudly, state things about and to parents and teachers such as, “This may not be the school for you.” I commonly heard from teachers that SLS was not necessarily a good fit for all children, and Mark, the parent advocate introduced in Chapter 3, shared his thoughts about how some EMOs perceived parents’ choices to attend, to not attend, to remain at, or to leave their charter schools if they were unhappy with something:

You can sell it as, “Well, we had it open and we opened it for everyone, but if they didn’t come then that’s on them.” In other words, if you do not like the way things are done here, don’t expect to change it. This is how we do it and there are plenty of other options out there. This school isn’t for everyone.
Marcus, a father with a young child who would be attending SLS for kindergarten, expressed a sympathetic view:

And so it’s not like one size fits all. Schools have these different pulses, they have these different nuances. They have different things that they find that they value more. And so, I think if you know your child and you say “OK, my child would value this more, and my child will value that more,” then that school is better for you and that school’s better for you and they’re both great schools and have fun.

While in some people’s view this was a beautiful aspect of choice, for others, such variety created a volatile and shaky system, with schools constantly in flux and pressured as they attempted to meet the needs of their “customers” and to also attract new “clientele.” As a consequence, this education market could allow some schools to actually limit opportunities for people to affiliate themselves with others who had similar ideas about schooling for their children.

SLS leaders, at some points in the school’s history, actively sought out opportunities for people with different types of social, cultural, and economic capital to come together, which Putnam (2000) describes as bridging these forms of capital. One evening, shortly after I had started spending time with stakeholders at SLS, I talked informally with the passionate principal who was preparing to leave for a position in another state, and he shared that a goal for the leaders at SLS was to increase diversity. They succeeded in this, in part, by intentionally providing the bus service for students who lived outside of the neighborhood who could otherwise not attend. Some parents loved the fact that the school was intentionally more diverse than other area district public schools. At the same time, others were increasingly concerned about how some changes in demographics, such as rising numbers of students who were English language learners and students who were living in
poverty, were in tension with the existing “culture” of learning and teaching. Academic needs were changing and, thus, were challenging some existing practices.

This became increasingly noticeable to me during my time in the field. For example, some parents liked that they had the opportunity to participate in shared decision-making at SLS, which had always been an important aspect of SLS’s organizational structure. On the other hand, as pressures to provide different resources for a more diverse population and to maintain enrollment grew out of concerns related to losing students to nearby school “competitors,” teachers, school leaders, and parents sometimes found themselves in conflict about what was best for the school. One area school leader said, about the pressure to attract families, “Let’s say [a parent] gets open enrolled into a school. The mentality is, ‘We can raise noise… because you serve us.’ And um, you serve the parents as opposed to the students.” Other stakeholders expressed similar views. What was, perhaps, a fragile working consensus about the vision and priorities for SLS as a school “community” became increasingly challenged as pressures to compete increased.

For example, a district school leader told me about a language immersion teaching program that was being distributed by the district to some schools to keep up with what they felt was a demand in the area. Some of the new, “competing” charter schools offered intense foreign language programs and, since district leaders were aware of this, they worked to repackage or “sell” their schools in new ways. Understandably, such changes at school sites, despite being attractive to many parents, also negatively influenced others’ views on what was happening in schools. One mother shared her strong and increasingly angry and disappointed views about these types of appeals to parents, which she felt were upsetting what was once a “beautiful” community:
I don’t want them [her children] to specialize in Mandarin in kindergarten. I want them to be a kid and I want them to learn to think. And my children can think for themselves… The water is very muddy. Everybody is looking at everybody else all the [curse word] time to figure out what they want. You want what your neighbor has because there is a lot of keeping up with the Joneses.’ …That is exactly what is happening right now. They are copying [a charter school organization] and [another charter school organization]. The competition has driven out the innovation. It has created a copycat scenario. Now all of these schools have to conform. It is not driving innovation! It is driving conformity!

On the other hand, John, an EMO administrator, “love[d]” how schools had opportunities and were being challenged to reconsider what and how they offered education in a market. His comments should be read in light of the fact that his schools were amongst the highest scoring in the state. From his point of view, this competition was great, and not problematic, for influencing families’ choices:

I mean, the DPSS lost a bunch of kids this year to come to [an EMO charter school], OK? Let’s say, we have gained 400 kids, so I would think that those 400 kids probably came from the DPSS. We’re gonna get blamed for stealing their kids. They’re not gonna get harangued for their attrition rate. So, they’re gonna blame somebody else for their attrition, namely us, and we’re gonna be called thieves for taking those kids. But, somehow, when kids leave us to go to other schools, we get called on the carpet for our attrition rate versus the other schools getting called on the carpet for recruiting our kids. You know what I mean? So, I would rather just say, “Hey, I’m not gonna fault you for your attrition rate if you don’t fault me for our attrition rate.” I lose kids to other schools who’ve recruited them, that want those
kids [names three private schools and two large area public high schools]… because of the trappings of a big high school that we [choose not to] offer. They are going to those schools because they want to be at those schools versus mine.

Amanda: And how do you feel about that?

John: I'm OK.

Amanda: Do you like that nature of a school system?

John: Yeah, I love it! And that’s the heart of the choice movement. But that means that we will lose some kids to other schools. These kids aren’t attriting and then failing out of the world. They are going to another school and doing well, and getting things that we don’t offer.

John liked the opportunities and various “niches” that were made possible for these high-achieving students through Arizona’s education market. But, I suggested above that the district public schools faced a different problem in defining the visions of their school sites. Whereas EMO charter schools could offer a “niche” to a particular group of students and then move on to open schools in other places once they felt satisfied that they had nearly saturated their local market with families who were interested, district public schools were plagued with an increasing pressure to maintain enrollments and therefore funding for all public school students. Thus, the district public schools in the DPSS were faced with a conundrum of trying to attract families with “niche” opportunities yet also remain relevant for the majority of students in the area who still attended their public schools.

Multiple stakeholders, whose children were enrolled at one of two EMOs’ charter schools, or who had had them enrolled at some point in the past, shared how they loved the opportunities that their children’s charter schools provided to re-imagine “community.” They were proud of the “niche” that their schools were able to serve, which worked “for
some students and for some families” who were attracted to the style and curricular methods used within the organization. Two individuals in separate conversations even shared with me how they believed that their charter school was providing an opportunity for parents to imagine and create a community wherein families were buying property in the neighborhood to be close to the school and to be close to others who attended the same school. So, they were essentially creating a neighborhood school around a charter school:

Erica: There’s definitely people that travel to go to charter school… I would say, like, probably 60% of the kids live in the school’s neighborhood that go there. But what’s also interesting is a lot of families are moving to the neighborhood, like they’ve already been in the charter school a couple years. And they know they’re going to be staying there, so people who have lived in, like, another part of the metropolitan area, or not even that far away either… are making the move to be in the school’s neighborhood. Or also, like, this little pocket by charter school… the school’s neighborhood is kind of expensive, so it’s not like you can just live there. It’s ridiculously overpriced. So… … This whole pocket of reasonable homes are being scooped up by these charter school families. So, they can move from their home in another part of the metropolitan area and you get a comparable home in this other pocket. So, there’s a little, like, real estate explosion going on right there with the charter school families because the kids, it’s right behind charter school, so a lot of kids walk to school. So, I know at least ten families in the last year and a half or two years that have literally moved to that little neighborhood just to be at charter school.

It is interesting, somewhat ironic, and potentially problematic that relatively affluent parents were creating a geographically bounded school community around an open enrollment EMO charter school. In Chapter 8, I will consider how this may be an unintended
consequence of market-based school choice programs. After all, this real estate phenomenon was reproducing the very dynamic that Friedman (1955) proposed would be disrupted by a market-based school choice system.

As a final example of how stakeholders at both district public schools and charter schools imagined their schools as communities through an opportunistic perspective, I observed, in various settings, how people affiliated with one school spoke about their own school in relation to others. For example, at a district bond meeting with parents and teachers from a number of schools in the DPSS, I saw how parents openly questioned the DPSS leaders about where their school was in the line-up to receive needed financial support in comparison to other schools in the district. Also, some schools were described on their websites in comparison to what they offered that other schools did not.

As for charter schools, Masters Group and Strong Establishment charter schools actively promoted opportunistic perspectives of their schools as imagined communities in a way that set their schools apart from others that were also funded with public tax dollars. Although as charter schools, they are public schools, both EMOs asked parents for a voluntary donation of $1,500 per student to offset the cost of providing what they described as a unique and high standard of education that could not otherwise be met with the funding provided by the state of Arizona. Another example of how power and money helped to drive opportunities in the community was at Agave Elementary, a well-respected traditional public school in the district. Many of Agave’s parents had relatively high levels of social, cultural, and economic capital. Each year, a small group of parents held a fundraiser. It was well-known in the community that this one fundraiser typically raised at least $100,000 for that public school alone.
These examples of fundraising, which were more a signal of the economic capital of school stakeholders than they were an indicator of whether schools were a district public school or charter school, displayed how economic power and influence might have the potential to create sustainability, growth, and strengthened “niches” in a market-based school choice system. One EMO leader, in fact, suggested that there was even potential for a “cultural renewal”:

We run small schools but we want to run them at massive scale. Uh, because this is a cultural renewal project… Market language makes sense, too. If policymakers, thinking about themselves as a venture capitalist, where they want to put resources for the sake of some ROI [Return on Investment]… if you’re thinking like a VC, where do I want to put my resources in order to get the most ROI? And, again, you have to be savvy about that. A VC is very savvy about all the variables that go into that. You don’t just throw a bunch of money at everything. You do spread your risk around, you hedge some things, you spread, and you invest across a platform, because in the aggregate you’re going to get the ROI you are looking for, and um, hopefully… There’s risk involved, always. So I think that if the policymakers thought in terms of the return and why are we putting money in these places and what are the terms that we want? Um, in terms of expectations for that ROI? You know, it would make, I think it would make things a lot easier in terms of having a discussion about why we are spending money because what you get otherwise is just, “Oh, they’re just pumping money into a system that is a black hole and nobody knows where it is going and you kind of look the other way.” … We need to make these investments, but in a savvy way. Like a person really truly in a marketplace would do… It’s all part of this season of trying to prove something to the
policymakers, prove something to the marketplace, to do that in *inner-city neighborhoods* you have to get certain scale in the suburbs and so you go out and you get that scale. Why? Because you also want to be in the inner city. You want to be in every nook and cranny.

Beyond appealing for extra funding from its families, the EMO leader passionately shared even more about how the EMO’s movement, in his perspective, might even be revolutionary to the point of acting as a role model for all schools:

I don’t think that there should be a school for every kid, even though all kids are different. I do think that, you know, public education ought to be built in such a way as it, um, it serves the individual. You know, we like to say here that there’s no such thing as teaching a classroom. Right? No such thing as teaching classes…. the only thing that really exists is teaching children, teaching individuals. We try to tell our teachers that you can’t love “humanity.” That’s an abstraction, a class is an abstraction. You can love a spouse, right? Or a neighbor that keeps their music up too loud or a person that rear-ends you, something, a real thing, but you can’t love an abstraction. And so, I think we should have choice. But I don’t think that what we are going to find over the next ten to 20 years is a thousand flowers blooming. That’s what you see at the beginning, and then some of those flowers are going to wither and die because they’re not sustainable. But the heartiest ones, the most beautiful ones, the ones that are most compelling, will stick around. You know, makes a lot of sense to have coding academies, in my mind, or schools for kids that want to work with their hands, or an *arts school* or something like that for a kid who really wants to put their focus on ballet or the violin or something. Um, but I think that… when it comes to most students, I think that most of them… are gonna go to
a public school that provides the basic things that you need. And um, and that’s really what we’re trying to be.

According to his thoughts, this EMO administrator viewed his organization as one that was imagining itself as a new community of public school teachers and learners for the future of public education. For him, this community was one where parents and teachers were attracted to charter schools because public schools, as currently arranged, were fraught with “bureaucracy.” His personal passion for learning and his desire to share this passion with others was apparent during my time with him, and his desire for the EMO’s charter schools to serve as role models for the school choice movement was also evident.

**Institutional-Identity Perspective**

Institutional-identity explanations of schools as imagined communities were observable at SLS in ways similar to how the EMO described the charter schools above. Stakeholders believed that schools served a greater purpose than just to exist as cold, public, bureaucratic institutions. Especially through the organizing efforts supported by AIG, some stakeholders felt a strong commitment to push beyond simple understandings of schools as places where children should perform on exams and be monitored by administrators at the school, district, and state levels. Josh, the lead organizer for AIG, saw schools as a place where adults might be role models for children to observe and take part in the process of civic engagement, and as sites where young children and adults could also learn to “name their future.” This perspective encouraged a belief in providing democratic spaces for discussions around pertinent issues, and for parents’ and teachers’ voices to be expressed in a way that promoted democratic organization and the duty of individuals to work together for the public common good. Josh’s view, and one that many other stakeholders also shared, exemplified how SLS, at least in its historical context, was particularly unique in
providing an intimate setting whereupon children were encouraged to grow as creative, empowered, and self-directed leaders. For many parents, SLS provided a larger purpose than for students to just exist in an “institutional world” (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2006, p. 17). Rather, children were encouraged to be a part of a changing, developing society. As Grace said about one of her own (now adult) children who attended SLS:

So you built those children that are not, I was just reading this recently, and I loved the words they used when they said, the obedience model versus the responsibility model. She had the responsibility model. “Oh, I know how to do this, I learned how to do it and I can help.”

Also, during a meeting at SLS, several students, having had practiced with members of AIG beforehand, confidently stood in front of legislative district elected officials, the superintendent of the DPSS, board members, parents, and members of the community who lived close by, to share with them what they demanded from their public schools, and what they argued were unjust policies and practices in Arizona. This “process,” according to Josh, is key to improving civic engagement and for helping civilians find their voice and strategize for change.

There is also a possibility, though, that what counts for “voice,” “democratic processes,” “revolutionary” schooling, and the experience of participating in school choice in general, can be complicated when some stakeholders feel like “outsiders.” To illustrate just one case, some stakeholders at a school in the DPSS felt like “outsiders” when a small number of parents got together to voice complaints at the district level about their concerns with how the school was run. The “outsiders” felt as if the “collective group” that visited the district was not truly speaking for the entire group. Some parents were so hurt by this incident that they exited the school and, in at least one instance, the district altogether.
Then, some parents enrolled their students in other district or charter schools that they would not have previously ever considered in the past. Thus, the “line” that they walked was erased and redrawn, or shifted, due to circumstances and a complicated array of social and cultural factors that caused them to question their place in the “community.”

**Conclusion**

Overall, I observed how stakeholders “imagined” schools as communities from different perspectives, and these were based on a complex set of experiences and perspectives that could change over time and due to circumstances. I also observed some problems with the notion that schools are communities. As poignantly stated by Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006), although there will always be potential for schools to be imagined as communities that are, “all-inclusive as in the ‘global village,’ in reality any notion of a school as a community is exclusive, either based on residential area or group identity” (p. 18). This was even more sharply pointed for stakeholders at SLS and its surrounding community, including its charter schools, whereupon stakeholders themselves were imagining and re-imagining boundaries through “niche,” market-oriented styles of schooling. As Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) explain:

Even public schools, which are purportedly open to all children, have particular constituencies often differentiated by location, social class, or ethnic, cultural, and other characteristics attributed to its members. As bounded communities, schools have designated insiders and outsiders so we can distinguish between “our” school and “theirs.” Indeed, most extracurricular activities, particularly sports, band, and academic competitions, are predicated on rivalries between school communities. Though competition may bolster school spirit and community pride, they also reinforce the exclusive nature of school as communities. (p. 18)
This was, according to my observations, one great challenge faced for the DPSS, where school choice, even though it had been around for a long time, continues to grow.

As a final illustration that highlights the general complexity of school choice and notions of community, one mother, Tanya, spoke about why one school was a difficult setting for her and her family. She said that the community:

didn’t feel cohesive, it didn’t feel like community. And then the people that, I’m okay with the different demographics, but there was some people that were just there because it was close to them and they’re sort of, “Drop off your kids, I don’t care to have play dates with you” type people, I guess. Or, they just felt, like, they weren’t invested in their kids in the way that we are invested in our kids. And we kept trying to gravitate during those two weeks… is there a family that we can connect with here that are like us a little bit that want to get together?

Tanya moved her child to six different schools by second grade as she looked for places where she and her family might “gravitate” to others to feel socially, culturally, and academically included in a community. In our interview, she tearfully described how she believes that she had thus far failed her daughter. In the next chapter I describe how, for Tanya, such pressures for her child and her family to belong to the right school were also exacerbated by notions of “accountability.” This was true not only for Tanya, but also for many stakeholders.
CHAPTER 7
ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Introduction

In this section, I use Garn and Cobb’s (2008) framework for understanding school choice and accountability, which identifies four distinct models of “accountability” that “are embedded in the school choice movement” (p. 2): bureaucratic, performance, market, and professional models. Below, I provide examples to show how stakeholders’ conceptualizations of accountability influenced their choices, and I explain how social and cultural experiences often worked together to form stakeholders’ complex notions and expectations of “accountability.”

Most stakeholders invoked at least one of these accountability models. The ways in which they understood and talked about accountability and school choice together were, again, dependent, like their notions of “community,” upon a variety of different concerns (e.g., Ball et al., 1996; Jennings, 2010). Stakeholders’ interpretations of accountability placed strong pressures on administrators and teachers, and sometimes caused confusion, anxiety, and frustration for parents. These findings highlight how procedural and programmatic structures at school sites, affected by expanding accountability policies, changing school cultures, and individual actors’ personal beliefs about the role of schooling, all influenced families’ choices as they made meaning of the school system of which they were a part.

School Site Changes and Resulting Controversies

To start, I describe an ongoing tension that was growing within SLS amongst some stakeholders, to show how conflict about new curricular programs and perceived communication issues with the administration ultimately affected some parents’ and teachers’ choices. As long as they had the resources to take part in choosing schools,
families were easily able to consider whether or not to exit and move to a different school. This is perhaps a unique feature of metropolitan school districts in Arizona because of the state’s long-standing school choice policies. In the DPSS there were continually more options close to SLS for parents to consider in the event that they were dissatisfied with the school.

At SLS, internal school site conflicts amplified during my time conducting fieldwork and, even as this study was being written, SLS was moving away from its historically rooted multi-age methods. A range of disagreements amongst stakeholders about how this was being implemented and managed eventually led to some parents’ and teachers’ noticeable criticisms of the administration, district, and each other. Some parents feared that SLS was changing, and that the school might even lose its identity as a school of choice and be folded into a traditional public school model. Even parents who were just beginning to make a choice about where to send their young children to school were aware of the conflicts. In the end, some teachers and families left the school, the principal resigned, and some who had intended to enroll their children in SLS changed their mind because of the perceived problems that occurred.

My fieldnotes after one staff meeting at SLS that occurred before I knew much about the conflicts that were going on in the school began to provide details about this discord:

I was observing the room, and saw that there were four goals hand-written on a whiteboard, from what I can only guess was a previous professional development meeting or another type of staff meeting. The goals were:

• Goal: Strong community at SLS

• Goal: To create an authentic assessment process and define its component(s)
• Goal: Define [new curricular methods] meaning/expectations for the SLS community
• Goal: Foster clear and consistent communication through providing and maintaining effective means of communication structures for the whole community.

At this time I observed that these goals struck me as the backdrop for much of what I had heard in personal communications with teachers and parents about the tensions that the school was facing with regards to assessment scores, new curricular methods, and a vision for the school community. I knew that there were strains and concerns over the increasing focus on standardized assessment data at the school. This was, to many, directly related to the school’s recent drop in the state’s school performance grade from a B to a C. The more I got to know community members, the more openly they shared with me how they viewed increasing expectations to “perform” well and to be “competitive” within the district. Some stakeholders, at the time, were suspicious of the district’s intentions, and they feared that district leaders wanted to dismantle the school’s model. Others in the community saw some of the increasing focus on assessment data as an opportunity to work on strengthening teaching and learning methods, and to critically consider what was working well in the school and what might be improved. Regardless of the roots of the growing conflicts, which were causing noticeable stress amongst some stakeholders, my point here is to consider how these conflicts influenced families’ choices.

It was not until approximately four months later that I began to learn about the context for the creation of the goals that I saw on the whiteboard. On the day that I was at the staff meeting, I was impressed with the way teachers grouped themselves into professional development clusters of their choosing to focus on one of four areas of curriculum and instruction. Staff members who had expertise in a particular area conducted these sessions. I left the meeting thinking how much I would have enjoyed, when I was a K-
12 teacher, being a part of a professional development session like the one I had just attended at SLS, and how encouraged I would have felt as a professional in this particular teaching community.

Upon meeting with one school stakeholder four months later, I learned that the goals I had observed on the whiteboard and noted in my jottings were actually the result of some underlying perceived communication issues amongst some staff and administration. The four goals, drafted by stakeholders after they had surveyed SLS stakeholders, were meant to provide guidance for clearer communication within the school. Some stakeholders were unhappy with the new curricular plans and professional development programs that had been rolled out in the school without their professional input, and so they created the survey. They found these programs to be problematic because the “spirit” of SLS had been to involve a range of voices in decision-making. Some, but not all, of these plans were connected to directions from the district, and some, but not all, staff members and parents did not think that the teaching methods tied to the new curricular programs and materials were effective for students.

Problems also existed at the district level, which were significant to the issues unfolding at SLS. The district superintendent resigned mid-year after his relationship with a small number of district school board members deteriorated, which resulted in the hiring of a new district superintendent. Some SLS stakeholders believed that the superintendent who resigned had been a supporter, or as they described, an “ally,” of SLS and that he wanted to work with the school to help maintain its unique model for teaching and learning. As conflict increased around these and other matters concerned with communication, relationships amongst some stakeholders at SLS began to be negatively affected, and some began to leave the school.
One stakeholder, for example, shared her opinion about how disagreements at the school were handled:

Then we got together as a group, a small group got together, and sent out a survey saying, because everybody was just livid… basically there were three things that we needed, to trust more. It wasn’t trust, it was, like, communication, timing, not getting something on Sunday night saying, “This is what we’re doing Monday,” right?

As disagreements and frustrations mounted, some stakeholders at SLS who were also affiliated with AIG became increasingly involved with the school-level issues, which took members’ time and energy away from their larger district- and state-level foci from the previous years. I have discussed earlier in this study how AIG intentionally pressured leaders and politicians to represent area stakeholders’ voices and commitments to policies that promoted social justice. Now, I saw AIG actions occur at both the micro-levels (for example, at the school sites and in specific legislative districts) as well as at the macro-levels (for example, at the Arizona Capitol where AIG affiliates would meet with legislators and attempt to pressure them as they were deciding on state-level policies). Their work was impressive and powerful. The AIG members at the school adopted tactics, such as meeting together with SLS stakeholders to discuss conflicts that were occurring at SLS and to deal with what they saw were problems with some of the school’s policies, practices, and management.

At the same time, AIG members’ involvement at SLS was unusual to the extent that many other schools do not have institution and community organizing leaders who can help stakeholders work together to be a part of strategic change. Individuals who took part in organizing with AIG were active in helping others address the concerns of teachers and parents. A point of dissension, though, was observable, since all stakeholders did not agree
that the leadership at the school level was working in a problematic way. As such, other parents and some teachers disagreed with those who were pressuring the school leadership and the district to make organizational changes. Numerous relationships broke down amongst parents, some of whom were involved in the parent-teacher organization. By the second half of the school year, the principal resigned, a number of families who were on different sides of the debate around the concern over school changes left the school, and many others were reconsidering whether, despite what they had always loved about the school, they would keep their children at SLS. When I talked with various stakeholders about this fallout, most understood that it was due to many pressures coming from different angles related to the state-assigned grade, relationships amongst stakeholders, ability to move schools, and concerns about the school more generally.

As I discuss below, SLS, as well as other district schools in the area, were under swelling pressure to compete for families in a way that was perhaps similar to how businesses might compete for customers. Due to the large variety of options that parents had to take part in school choice, many, but not all, parents were in a position that allowed them to either remain at the school through the conflicts or to quite easily exit. I further show how, in spite of the complex and relationship-damaging fallout, many stakeholders’ feelings and deep care for SLS and the people in the school, even those with whom they disagreed, remained strong. Perhaps encouraged by the culture that had existed in the school for a long time, some stakeholders emotionally spoke in terms of the school and stakeholders moving forward in a process of “healing.” “Conflict is good,” and, “Change is good,” are two comments that I heard numerous times from people when they were speaking about these controversies. Some stakeholders who were in the very center of
involvement in the conflict stayed at the school, even though the future of SLS, in relation to its unique teaching and learning model as a district school of choice, was still unknown.

As one person who was deeply invested in and committed to the school poignantly described, the school’s future was “earth-quaky.” As I was exiting the field, stakeholders were still quite unsure about how the district might organize or re-organize the school under the leadership of a new principal and the new district superintendent. The mounting pressures faced by stakeholders were, in part, a direct consequence of accountability policies. Stakeholders at SLS and in the surrounding community had different views about these “accountability” policies that affected their choices, which I now discuss below.

“You Have to Either Mold With What’s Happening or You Sink”

Bureaucratic Accountability

Bureaucratic processes, such as increasing rules and regulations at the school, proved to be a point of much consideration for individuals at SLS, and these influenced how they made decisions about choosing schools. Some school members were angered by the bureaucracy that seemed to, more and more, get in the way of doing what they felt was best for students at SLS. Some stakeholders felt that there was an unnecessary preoccupation with the rules and regulations at the school site that were impeding the school’s unique opportunities to support children. In one case, stakeholders described how they were upset that a dog, who was owned by a staff member and who accompanied her to school everyday, had to suddenly be barred from the school upon direction from the district. Many SLS stakeholders loved the dog, and it was common for students to have the chance to be rewarded for making good choices by having time with and brushing the dog. Although some stakeholders were not overly concerned about the new rule that had been
implemented, others were offended that, for no apparent reason that they understood, the
dog’s beneficial presence at the school was not honored.

One EMO administrator, who had a strong opinion of “bureaucracy” in Arizona’s
public schools and districts, talked about bureaucratic processes as a big problem for district
public schools and as a part of “the system” that was ultimately failing the public schools.
He said:

Yeah, I mean down at Agave and SLS and over at [a nearby private school], you know,
there are teachers there that love, desperately love, their kids and… and they take
just the bureaucratic platforms that they have to do their work, on which are terrible,
and they make lemonade out of lemons! But they should be freed, Amanda! They
should be freed of those, you know (changed the direction of his statement), I mean this is
where the market, you know, “school choice” is really language for a free market
within education and there are very few of those in the states. Arizona has probably
the most robust free market. …Um, I think that disruption is exactly what public
education needs. There is nothing sacrosanct about any school. There’s nothing
about Agave, or about [a Masters Group school], about [a nearby private school] that, you
know, Jesus looks at and goes, “You can’t touch that!” And the fact that we feel that
way has nothing to do with children! It’s a nostalgia or a fear for a friend’s job or my
own job, but it’s nothing to do with children and certainly not with parental choice.
So, there’s nothing sacred about any of these places. The people that make them up
are sacred. And the associations, the free associations that people in community are
able to make with one another will determine what remains and what goes away.
That’s sacred. The free associations are sacred. So, I think it’s really good that that
disruption is happening.
In his conversations, this EMO administrator felt that the disruption of traditional ways for thinking about public education, and the “bureaucracy” attached to that thinking, provided the potential for a free market to, rather literally, “free” individuals.

On the other hand, Mark, the parent advocate, talked about how, for him and his coworkers, some bureaucratic processes, though not all, were necessary to ensure that students were treated lawfully, as well as in a way that promoted justice and equity for all students in Arizona instead of just some. He directly challenged some of the practices at nearby charter schools as well as those at district public schools when, in some cases, students were not receiving the services that they required. Mark spoke of his serious concern about a lack of foundational structures within one EMO, and he shows how this affected some students with disabilities:

I am focused on an accountability campaign right now with [an EMO] because I’ve taken great exception to what I’ve seen with [EMO]. And so I am going through, and I am just piece by piece addressing some of the, um, issues I see with their adherence to expected just civil rights guidelines as they relate to students with disabilities. Um, you know, I looked at accessibility of their website, accessibility of their campus, policy and procedures… I’ve done 14 OCR complaints, [federal-level Office for Civil Rights Discrimination complaints] of [an EMO] so far over the last few months.

Here, Mark shows how bureaucratic procedures that were in place at the federal level had the potential to hold public institutions, including EMOs since they are public institutions and receive public funding, accountable to serve students equally (see Darling-Hammond, 1989, for literature related to this).
At the same time, both Mark, the parent advocate, and Matthew, an EMO leader, similarly agreed that there can be corruption across the gamut of schools. Matthew, in speaking to me about the “disruption” that he felt public schools needed and that market-based systems could provide, also explained that it was wrong for people to assume, in their criticisms of school choice programs, that district public schools were not sometimes corrupt, as well. I brought up to him a problem that has occurred for some public school districts, whereupon students leave their district public school to attend a charter school, only to return to the public school within the same year but after funds had already been allocated to the charter school for the pupil’s enrollment. Matthew observed:

This assumes that there is not corruption in the district school. This assumes that district schools are safe houses. That they’re the predictable “Steady Freddy.” But everything about that criticism, Amanda, assumes something positive about the district system and something negative about the innovators and entrepreneurs.

Both Mark’s and Matthew’s individual views, although they come from different standpoints and work in the education sector for very different reasons, shared similar concerns about some of the bureaucratic elements that exist in all school sectors. Their viewpoints diverged in relation to the innovators and entrepreneurs of which Matthew spoke. Mark, in working hard with parents to promote the rights of students, especially those with disabilities, criticized the tendency for some EMOs to not serve any and all students and, instead, to focus on their innovations that work for some students. Here, rules and regulations in the public sector had fallen short of ensuring that the EMOs were accountable to serve all students, even though families may not be aware that this is an issue. Mark commented:

The consistent things I see [are] a lack of recognition at the administrative level that [the] school has to comply with the same rules, the same regulations, the same laws
that all other public schools have to operate under. There’s almost, like, not a recognition that [their] school has to be inclusive, [or that they] have to have [their] doors open for all students.

**Performance Accountability**

Mark suggested that it is possible for some EMOs to have schools that perform well in school rankings because they are not actually serving students that represent all public school students in the state. Beyond the ways that “bureaucratic processes,” or rules and regulations in the public sector, were or were not adequately protecting all of Arizona students’ civil rights, parents were still affected by performance rankings when making choices. One mother, who was also an administrator though not at SLS, talked about the performance pressures that the DPSS and SLS faced, and how she predicted that the future of SLS could change as more focus was placed on competing with other schools based on standardized testing:

The new principal is going to come in [to SLS] and, because the mission statement isn’t very clear and the school site plan isn’t well defined, the principal’s going to do that and then, to prevent further conflict, they’re probably going to take it in a direction that’s more academic. I’m just betting that. And for many years, 18 years, SLS was very fortunate to have a community and teachers that were very much of like mind and administration. And they were on a little island unto themselves, a utopia with their little garden and everything, really in every way. And then people came knocking at their door and kind of penetrated that little idyllic…

Amanda: Who?

Well, test scores, competitors, charter schools, the school district, administration, the superintendent saying, “You need to figure this out.” And also the State
Department, with the posting of these grades and these giant letters that are attached to the fronts of schools, that’s what I mean. That kept raining down on them and, really, what utopia can really take all that constant bombardment?

This mother and school leader predicted that the performance pressures that were building were making schools and leaders “accountable” in different ways than they had ever experienced before, even though they were not serving the same groups of students as those at nationally high-ranking charter schools against whom they were compared.

Grace, a long-time teacher at SLS, struggled to understand the full purpose of general standardized testing procedures and performance-based teacher evaluation systems. Grace was a knowledgeable, gently-spoken, and well-respected teacher at the school, and she talked with me about her confusion and the apparent contradictions in the testing models versus the school’s longer-standing teaching and learning models. “Performance” models were increasingly important as measures for judging both her students’ and her own performance, and she seemed bewildered when she said:

So I look at those numbers and I’m like, “That makes no sense to me!” And then I look at what my kids’ scores were and I said, “Now it really makes no sense because I just tested 64 sixth graders and the average growth across my 64 was 178 points and they were supposed to grow 38.” So, I’m a rock star and I’m frustrated because I don’t think they’re doing what they should be, so where does this number even come from… but what does it really mean? I don’t know where the 38 came from, I don’t really understand what it means, and I certainly don’t think all of my students are soaring. They did pretty well and I don’t think I’m a terrible teacher, but I need to understand what this data means. And so I don’t think the data models help very much.
Grace and other teachers, including the teacher who I previously described as helping to create a survey to challenge what some viewed as abrupt curricular changes occurring at the school, also found the increasing pressures from standardized testing and high-stakes teacher evaluation systems to be in tension with the Montessori-styled, multi-age methods that had always been paramount to the school. Sarah, a mother and active member of AIG, once publicly stated at an AIG accountability meeting where the district superintendent and a school board member were present that, whilst SLS wanted to work with the DPSS to be a flagship school for the district, they also did not want to lose the vision of their school that was unique and important for them. Yet another stakeholder at the school talked about the difficulty of maintaining parents’ support of the school in the face of increasing “performance accountability” models:

You have a philosophy that does not mesh with the demands of testing and curriculum and policies and rules, and you have a philosophy that’s just kind of like, “We will teach our kids and when they leave here they will be self-advocating, self-directed, self-motivated learners, and they will be okay, just okay. Some of them will go to college and some of them will not but they will be okay, they’ll be good members of society.” That was our philosophy. When you put all of these other things there becomes this huge battle of trying to maintain your philosophy under all these rules. And so when they said, “You have to start doing this curriculum,” and so then they start splitting by the grade, because that’s the only way we can figure it out… When you have to do all this testing and you have to do this mandatory, “They must focus and learn this even when they’re ready or not,” there’s an internal struggle because some things you shake your head and you say, “This is not what’s in the best interest of this child! It might be in the best interest of that child, but it’s
not what’s in the best interest of this child.” … But you don’t have a choice. You have to do it because that’s what the rules, policies, and regulations state. So… your ground becomes very earth-quaky and you have to either mold with what’s happening or you sink. And we have to change… [like] the year that Arizona said, “We’re testing everyone and it’s all about performance.” And, I think, was that the year that the No Child Left Behind came into play? It’s all about performance… And then the one year we got the C, the hammer came down… We can’t do this, we’re [DPSS’s city]… I do have to say this… if you’re teaching kids right, they should be able to perform. So, this philosophy that we have is supposed to work, experiential learning. So the kids should be getting B+, A, I mean basically they should be getting it.

Ellie, a mother with a young son, felt the same way. She had an extensive educational research background and was planning to enroll her young son into kindergarten the following year. Ellie knew that whilst assessments did not provide a complete picture and, although she was looking forward to sending her child to SLS because many aspects of the school were attractive to her, she planned to keep a close eye on the quality of opportunities for learning provided to her son.

Overall, families saw past singular viewpoints on “accountability,” especially in terms of performance on standardized tests. Megan, a relatively new mother to SLS with young children, who was contemplating whether to keep her children at SLS due to the conflict that had occurred during the school year, talked about why she resisted viewing schools, including SLS, based only on the school’s performance in comparison to other schools in the area:
Again, it was a choice that was good not just for our kids but also for our family. We wanted a sense of community. We wanted to know about the space and place where our children were going to be spending a portion of their waking hours. It was not just teaching them their math facts. It was teaching them how to be good, healthy people, and that was more important to us than a test score.

**Market Accountability: “That Package is Like a Brand New Cadillac”**

That said, the way schools were or were not marketed affected families’ choices a lot, whether they stressed the school’s state-assigned grade, students’ performance on standardized tests, or unique teaching methods. Some stakeholders were aware that SLS did not market itself in the same ways that other charter and district public schools marketed to parents. Therefore, the school’s performance results tended to stand out as a defining characteristic. Some stakeholders at SLS wanted to change this, and realized that the role of marketing in the DPSS might be important for sustaining the school’s unique vision and teaching styles. Some parents, both older and newer to the school, supported efforts to increase marketing in the community to maintain the school’s relevance in the district, especially because SLS was often misunderstood. Others, though, rejected the notion of marketing because they felt that it directly contradicted the school’s non-competitive approach to education. This disagreement added another layer to the tension that was rising at SLS.

Whereas many parents spoke of trying to gather as much information about schools that they could when making decisions, the AIG-affiliated stakeholders, as described in Chapter 4, often added that it was important to have a critical eye through which to view marketing as a piece of public schooling. As I described in Chapter 4, Lynn’s experience with receiving the DPSS-created marketing materials about gifted programs at other district
schools for her son troubled her. As for other stakeholders, some teachers were concerned about how marketing to attract families could result in clashes of visions for the school, whilst administrators understood that marketing and attracting new families was a necessary part of their professional roles and responsibilities.

Robert was a parent who almost sent his child to SLS but did not because he was extremely surprised by and disappointed with the conflict that had occurred during the year. Mostly, he was upset about the resignation of the principal who, as I describe later in this chapter, was seen by Robert as a particularly special example of a leader who he trusted to be “professional,” “accountable,” and wholly beneficial for the both the school and his child. Robert, who was drawn to SLS when the principal gave him a tour of the campus, provided a fantastic metaphor for the tricky process of school choice in Arizona. He talked about what he called “The Cadillac Effect” with confidence and concern:

OK, so you know when you’re buying a car, you go look at, we all have this vision of what kind of car we want. We want a nice sporty luxury car, whatever. And just a term I use, a Cadillac. So schools are kind of like that for parents. We want our children to be in the best academic learning environment that we can put them in. And Strong Establishment and [two Masters Group schools], and some of the other schools, they have marketing teams and they have a budget to design their schools a certain way. And a lot of the newer charter schools, the architecture is just phenomenal. But the way that they design their schools to look, and I haven’t really been to too many inside of them, I hear stories from other parents. But it’s all this glitz, all the pomp and circumstance, the package. And again, I haven’t been into them really on the campus, but my impression is that, for parents, they do a really good job of making this package so that it looks really, really appealing to us as
parents. Like the libraries are this or that… but that package is like a brand new Cadillac.

School leaders, both at district public and charter schools in the area, were aware of the importance of this “packaging.” Although others did not describe the process as selling a Cadillac, one district public school leader did say that she felt like her job was to sell education as a sales person might sell a car.

For the most part, leaders at district public schools had viewpoints related to markets and accountability that were in contrast to the viewpoints of EMO leaders. In Appendix G, I provide a detailed table that shows rich data exemplars from both district public school leaders and EMO leaders to demonstrate this contrast in a side-by-side comparison. Overall, the data in the table show that district public school leaders expressed how they needed to understand, adapt to, and manage their schools with a marketing perspective always in mind. For example, one district public school leader talked about a perceived general awareness in the area that education was being treated like a commodity:

We’re very aware of charter schools, we school personnel in the district because you have, um… it is so competitive. People are so trendy in finding the next coolest thing, that’s being getting talked about on the soccer field and baseball field, what is like the next greatest thing that’s gonna help their son or daughter become a doctor.

Um, so, yeah, I mean, it’s just more of a commodity in this area.

Another district public school leader was concerned with declining enrollment in schools across the DPSS, which could result in school closures, and she worked hard to prepare materials that showed parents during tours that, in many cases, the “competing” charter schools were not always performing better on tests than the students at the district public school.
Alternatively, one EMO leader was not concerned about declining enrollment. Rather, he felt confident that the EMO had “gotten to the point” of nearly saturating its schools in the metropolitan area. Whilst district public schools were required to provide placements for all students in a catchment area, and one district school leader noted that there was declining enrollment in the district in part because there was not a baby boom, the charter schools did not need to deal with this consideration. They could grow their schools elsewhere in the country and even beyond the United States if they so desired.

Whereas one district public school leader talked about the need to work to dispel the myth to families that the charter schools in the area always performed better than the district public schools, another district public school leader talked about the overall challenge for any schools to keep up with EMOs that were “trendy” and attractive. Two EMO leaders’ quotations revealed much different perceptions. They were, either, not thinking about the district public schools much at all, since their competition was at the “national” level, or they had such a strong negative opinion of the public schools in the area that there was a disregard for how they might be experiencing their presence in the district. As one EMO leader confidently exclaimed, “The suburban schools are bad… it looks nice, they have really good facilities, but the instruction’s SHIT!” It is important to consider how the EMO leaders’ opinions were voiced from a “winning” position in the market according to popular accountability measures. Looking closer, though, the schools served a more advantaged population of students.

An EMO leader, in fact, alluded to this recognition that they served an advantaged population of students by considering the attractiveness of opening schools in suburban neighborhoods. He explained how it was helpful for EMOs to open where parents have a lot of financial resources and other capital to support the organization and, as one direct
effect of gaining these resources, the EMOs could help to create the “cultural renewal” in public education by subsequently opening schools in lower-income neighborhoods. As explained earlier, an EMO leader compared such a model’s potential for success to a venture capitalist’s focus on “ROI,” or Return on Investment. Confident of the EMO’s potential for Arizona and beyond, he believed that, if policymakers could think about education in this way that mimics venture capitalism, there could, indeed, be “revolutionary” results.

Interestingly and, as if to reaffirm how this perspective dominates the school choice market in Arizona, a district public school leader’s quotation shows how, from his perspective, smaller-scale attempts to provide and sustain “niche” one-site mom-and-pop charter schools, or even district public schools of choice like SLS, would likely not work in a place where these financially, politically powerful, and “prestigious” EMOs can dominate the market:

District public school leader: Charter schools have to up their game in a place [like] we live in this area…

Amanda: So you feel like it is specific to where you’re at?

District public school leader: … I feel it is. But I can’t imagine [a new charter] school coming onto a market, you know. Like, “I cannot only compete against the public schools, but I can’t compete against the other quote-unquote ‘prestigious’ charter schools, like [an EMO] and [an EMO], and be in that market myself as a mom-and-pop type of charter school or as a one school charter school.” I think it would be very challenging in this area. Because people are very, I mean, they are market driven in this area, and when I say this area, I don’t know how large that area is. I don’t know if that means just my neighborhood around here, but I don’t think that I’m
completely being too general in saying that. I would be quasi-confident saying that that would be a pretty good statement for all of the DPSS area.

The district public school leader saw and described first-hand the difficulties of a school choice system where EMO leaders have large amounts of capital, resources, and power, and can therefore say, as I shared in Chapter 6, “We run small schools but we want to run them at massive scale.”

To provide an alternative perspective, John, an EMO leader in a different organization than Matthew’s, expressed his concerns with local and wider misconceptions about Arizona’s EMO charter schools. We spoke of the challenges the organization faced in dispelling what he viewed were myths in a sincere way, and he genuinely cared about education and providing students with opportunities to reach for their utmost potential. John said, referring to the criticism that the schools are subtly selective:

I mean, we can’t be selective really! I mean, when we were one school in [Arizona city], or one school in [different Arizona city] and one school in [different Arizona city] and one school in [different Arizona city], I could survive by serving a niche group of individuals. But we are so big now that there aren’t that many people in that niche group. So, I mean, we’ve really, just by virtue of our expansion, become the thing that I think we always were, which is, we’re a place for any kid who is willing to work hard. And you don’t have to be a math and science… uh, you don’t have to be able to do calculus in third grade. I mean, but you do have to be willing to work hard, and the family has to be willing to support that. And, um, we are finding kids willing to work hard, so it’s been fun to be active in dispelling a bit of dirt, not dirt, but opinions that are contrary.
John’s comment, though, about the schools being an open place for anyone “who is willing to work hard” is a neutral way of also saying that they appeal to a specific group of parents who are able to provide for and support their children in the ways that were required for success in the EMO’s charter schools.

Perspectives that were popular in discussions about the potential benefits and pitfalls of charter schools’ increasing market-like presence throughout Arizona and the United States were often influential for parents, teachers, and school leaders. Issues related to market accountability, whether intentionally or unintentionally, were brought up many times by parents in my conversations with them. Beyond the market rhetoric, though, parents were also deeply concerned with what was happening inside of schools and, in some cases, this mattered a lot more than what type of schools they were.

**Professional Accountability**

As I showed in the previous section, Robert’s choice to not send his child to SLS was strongly influenced by the way he felt that the principal had been mistreated by some stakeholders at the school. Many other parents, as well, talked about how important it was for them to understand how teachers and school leaders carried out their roles and responsibilities and how they were enabled or constrained in their practice. They spoke of strengths, weaknesses, and areas in which teachers were able to show their professional expertise. In particular, the decline in standardized test scores at one point at SLS opened the door for stakeholder conversations about how the school staff might, as a collective group of professionals, think about ways to continually improve their practice. Some of those conversations were very touchy, because some stakeholders felt that they were being disrespected in the process. More specifically, some felt that they were being told what to do. Such perceived rigidity in professional practice was hard to accept at SLS where, as a
school with alternative methods for teaching and learning, teachers wanted freedom to artfully carry out their teaching with trust from other stakeholders in their professional capabilities.

Some teachers wished that they could be respected and trusted to use their own formative and professional assessments of students’ growth instead of being monitored with performance measures that were forced upon them. A number of stakeholders felt that autonomy in the classroom, often associated with schools of choice, was paradoxically becoming increasingly difficult to pursue. Whereas Matthew spoke of “freeing” schools from bureaucracy so that they could just teach, students’ needs at the EMO charter schools were not the same as they were in the district public schools, where there were more students who required special education services, more students who were English language learners, and more students who lived in poverty. With schools being judged using narrow measures of standardized assessment data, charter schools and other competing district schools had incentives to, as some said, “teach to the test,” and to attract students who tested well.

These practices felt like a direct attack against many educators and other stakeholders. Differing views about what actually makes a school of choice, or any school for that matter, “successful,” meant that discussions around accountability measures at SLS were often laden with disagreement. Stakeholders had fair questions about how multi-age classes could continue to be taught with pressures to “teach to the test” and were concerned about effectiveness for their students. As I described earlier, some staff members appreciated the process of critical dialogue around their professional practice that was the result of changes being implemented at the school and district levels. Others, though, felt that the ways in which new programs were being rolled out lacked a respect for the
professionalism of teachers at the school. Perhaps due to many parents’ close involvement
and welcomed participation in the school, there were a number of parents with whom I
spoke who had strong opinions about what was happening at the school site, and how the
teachers felt about it.

Yet I often found that, for some stakeholders, “professional accountability” meant
that teachers should automatically trust the curricular programs provided by professionals to
whom they were accountable (for example, teachers were accountable to principals and
principals were accountable to superintendents). This perspective did not sit well with some
teachers and parents who were attracted to SLS because of its vision to encourage students’
creativity and self-direction, and some challenges to the current ways of “doing things” felt
like a threat to experienced teachers’ professional capabilities. One teacher explained,
though, that there were actually other experienced teachers who did not feel as threatened,
and said that they were even very willing to work within new frameworks so long as the
process felt collaborative and mutually respectful. Believing that SLS was a unique and
valued school within the district and that, despite recent conflicts, the DPSS wanted to see
the school succeed, one well-respected and long-standing teacher, Joy, defended some of the
newer changes in the school and said:

The district says, “I want you to be [a particular subject] academy. That’s how they
were going to save SLS, I guess.” So anyway, we went through some difficult times
with that because there were some things that were just too rigid. Forced. And
some of the things that the parents complained about worked in my classroom. And
there [was] some common language that was used that I thought was very powerful
for the school. Some parents thought it was an overkill. Well, when you’re having
difficulties in your class and you have a common language and everybody
understands, there’s some value to that. And not every classroom has to look
different. So there was some stuff going on with that. And it [some new curricular
programs] just seemed to be kind of forced down upon us, and so that created some
difficulties.

Joy next referred to the new principal’s suggestion to try a different way, for a part of each
day, of organizing her classroom for a year, based on the principal’s own leadership
experiences at other schools. Joy really respected the new principal’s demeanor and her
apparent respect for their existing teaching practices. She just gently, according to Joy,
suggested that they might be open to see how things could go if they experimented with
other ways. Joy said:

And the new principal came in and said I want you to try it for a year. Just try it for
a year for me, please? And there’s something to be said about that. So they all
agreed to do that. And we did it not by any pressure from anyone, we just said we
think we’d like to try… but that will be the only time during the day. The rest of the
day [we] decide how [we’re] going to cut that pie every day, which is really free.

This comment shows that some of the committed and long-standing teachers at the school
were open to how the school might be developing and were willing to work together as
professionals to see how new ideas worked. As parents saw these responses to the new
principal from respected teachers at the school, and as relationships began to “heal,” some
were influenced to stay despite the conflicts that had occurred over the year.

As a different example, one teacher at an EMO charter school described what could
surprise those who associate charter schools with autonomy and opportunities to be “free”
from uniform methods of working. Because of the organizations’ strong beliefs in the
merits of one curricular package, many teachers who were committed to the school were
also proud to implement the curriculum in the same way across the entire organization. One teacher described what she loved about her intense and, in her opinion, very professional interview process when applying for a position and the thorough training that she received in preparation to teach the curricular package:

Erica: They would present me with a math problem and say, “How would you teach this to a kid?” And put you on the spot that way. You know, a really involved process interview… I was like, “Wow.” This is stressful but at the same time I was thinking they are, like, for my daughter as well, they are really picking good teachers going through the interviewing process… for a district school interview, [on the other hand] it was a panel of people who asked questions. But, that was it, they just asked you questions and then you answered it and you left and then you got the job. And so, I thought it was interesting that they did these demo lessons and still continue to do them to this day. They have not, like, forgot about their procedures or got lazy. …They just wanted to, well they use the same core math program which goes from… the concrete to the pictorial to the abstract, so they want to just see your terminology… the process that you use to go through it. Just making sure, like, are you explaining it in a whole way or are you just going through the steps?

A: Cool, yeah.

Erica: ‘Cause they’re all about the why and how, and not just, “This is how you do it.”

Amanda: … And so do you have freedom, quite a lot of freedom, in how you like to teach and what happens?
Erica: No, like, you have to be very aligned with the other teachers and how you teach it.

Amanda: Similar to [another school where she had taught]?

Erica: Similar… but even deeper with the math… So I got hired and, um, then it was, like, all this training we had to go through and always very, like two weeks of new hire training, and you had to do a lot of training. Which was great, I’m like, again, “They are really making sure that these teachers are prepared!”

Amanda: Yeah.

For this teacher, because she believed that the model was strong, teaching in a very structured model demonstrated the high professional value placed on the teachers. She felt that she was well vetted before being hired for the position, and that she was surrounded by colleagues who shared similar professional interests. This EMO charter school, for her, was the best place that she had taught. She really felt that she was being treated professionally, and she would not have wanted her children at any other school. Numerous other stakeholders saw these types of curricular packages as an example of how there is not much professional autonomy in many charter schools and other schools of choice after all. To the contrary of school choice notions related to autonomous professional practice, there were quite rigid structures with very specific, and intentionally monitored, methods for teaching practices in some schools. Such professional rigidity, with a “Like it or leave it,” approach towards both teachers and parents, appealed to some, but not all, families and teachers.

The ways in which the implementation of new ideas were negotiated at SLS with the new principal shows how important it was for the teachers, and many of the parents who were also staying at the school, to have a leader who they felt was working alongside them. Professional accountability played out amongst the teachers, school leaders, and other staff
members, and parents were then influenced by what they saw was occurring in the classrooms. There were complex relational interactions between district-level administrators, school-level employees, and families that were important as structural decisions were being made at the school, and these influenced how families were making choices. Possibly because school choice is so widely practiced in Arizona, some, but not all, families were carefully watching the professional decisions that were being made as they considered their options.

When speaking about charter schools and professional accountability, some stakeholders who tended to be critical of charter schools wondered about the professional competencies of charter school teachers and leaders because, in Arizona, charter school teachers are not required to have teacher certification. Some parents did not like this policy, while other parents appreciated that charter school leaders had the autonomy to hire those whom they felt had the best fit. Some stakeholders were also aware that, although charter schools were not required to hire teachers with valid teaching certification, some chose to. At the nearby EMO charter schools, teacher certification was not required. Teachers and school leaders who were a part of the EMO charter schools defended the organizations’ policy of not requiring teachers to be traditionally certified through a teacher education program. Instead, they argued that this was a great benefit that allowed them to choose amongst the very best and most qualified experts in their respective subject areas. This information is available on the organizations’ websites, and is a part of how the schools are marketed.

One mother who sent her children to SLS when they were young stated, “The charters are not as accountable as any public school is. The teaching requirements aren’t the same.” On the other hand, two stakeholders affiliated with EMO charter schools shared
with me, in separate conversations, a counterargument to this viewpoint. First, one said that such freedom was necessary, and that they could only develop in states that do not have teacher certification laws to hire the best professionals for the job. They had relationships with individual professors at schools who “send us lots of really great candidates every year,” and they recruited heavily from ivy-league schools to get teachers who were, in one EMO leaders’ opinion:

right out of grad school with advanced degrees in mathematics and engineering and science who can also work with high school kids, but they didn’t get a teaching certificate. And so, it allows us to access really high quality teachers.

Second, Erica, who, above, described the intensity of the hiring process at the EMO charter school where she worked, was very impressed and encouraged by the process and also felt that, as a mother, she was very happy to send her young children to a charter school where such care was put into hiring individuals who were the most professionally qualified for the position. She had not experienced this when applying for positions at traditional public schools. Erica’s positive perception of the professional atmosphere at her school, which she also considered when she chose the school for her children, is expressed here:

It was just a fun place, it was fun to work there. Amazing headmaster, just so professional. All of the people that worked there were very professional… since it’s charter, that’s one of the main differences. Like, you don’t have to have your state certification but you have to be highly qualified, you have to have the degree, so a lot of these teachers come from liberal arts schools. Some of them have education degrees but a lot of them have English or History degrees… they recruit from liberal arts colleges because we’re a liberal arts school. That’s our philosophy.
Robert, the father who was deciding where to send his son to school and who shared his opinion with me about the school choice movement’s “Cadillac Effect,” talked about meeting Samuel, SLS’s previous principal, when he went there for a tour. Robert was immediately impressed by Samuel’s care, qualifications, previous experience in the public school district, and passion. He also carefully observed Samuel’s behavior, which he thought was uniquely professional. The school-site conflicts that resulted in Samuel’s resignation, though, ultimately finalized Robert’s decision to not send his son to SLS. He was turned off by what he saw as some parents’ disregard for Samuel’s efforts to provide strong leadership at the school. He did not like what he understood to be a group of stakeholders who were, in his opinion, able to coerce the district to have him resign:

Not that I spent a lot of time at a bunch of schools, but Samuel would be out at the sidewalk greeting students as they come in and saying hello and he and I would have interactions and chat. And I enjoyed who he is, and that’s just, I think, rare. I don’t know that that happens a whole lot. I felt like these are feelings, no data to back it up, but this guy has his heart in it and really cares about what he’s doing and the direction he’s trying to take the school in, and that spoke to us. When things fell apart, we’re like “nah.”

Finally, Monica, a public school leader, though not at SLS, viewed her role as one that is likely different for school leaders who do not have to contend with selling schools in a school choice market. Monica explained how taking prospective families on school tours, to “sell” education just like people sell cars, was important in her role. She took on this professional responsibility with diligence, good preparation, and seriousness:

I probably tour, each year I probably toured 300 perspective parents. We do tours every Friday and then if it doesn’t fit in with their schedule, I’ll do individual tours
because I know that that’s my best marketing. ‘Cause if I tour somebody and they’re really happy, they’re going to go tell a friend, “Hey, I had the best tour today, you won’t believe it!” And so that’s always on our minds, and so I don’t pass the touring. It’s a big part of my schedule but I don’t pass that off… because I want to make sure that it’s the best tour the parent ever took. So when they’re done, I even send out [a postcard], “Thanks for coming, thanks for spending your time to come to [the school] and, if you have any questions…” I even put my cell phone number on the card to make it seem more personal. I see it no different than a sales person’s job, as you would sell a car, we’re selling education. So you have to really have a good presentation because it’s no different.

For Robert, Samuel’s efforts to show him what was unique about SLS and “the direction he’s trying to take the school in” worked. Intentionally or unintentionally, Robert, in a way, was sold his Cadillac, and he trusted his professional salesman. Even more, though, he was drawn to the professional care and passion that Samuel expressed in his interactions with families and students. Both Monica and Samuel understood some of their roles and responsibilities in the education market, and they were also able to show respect and care for families and students in the process. Community engagement and market engagement coexisted.

As for other parents’ understanding of professional accountability in the district, some resisted the push towards performance measures that, to them, were a direct attack on the professionalism of the teaching experience and, therefore, their own children’s experiences. Many, though, expected to be “sold.” They wanted to find the best place for their child and, as one leader described, in many cases were attracted to what was “trendy.” Expectations were high. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that there was one area
of school choice that I observed and that has been less thoroughly considered in analyses of school choice practices and programs. The way in which accountability was a notion projected onto parents was, at times, a very heavy weight. Parents’ perceived failures or other concerns about how their children were doing in a particular setting could be easily thrust onto both public schools and parents themselves, especially by stakeholders at “winning” schools in a competitive school choice system. Or, to use market-based language, perceived failures were projected onto the clientele who did not choose the right product for their child.

**Parental Accountability: An Important Component to School Choice**

In this final section, I return to Tanya, who I described at the end of the last chapter. Tanya’s only child will have been enrolled in six different schools by second grade and, beyond the stress that she disclosed about the pressures of finding a school where she and her child could feel bonded, she also said, “I have a feeling that my husband’s going to win this one [choosing their daughter’s sixth school placement] because I’ve made so many of the last choices and they’ve gone so sadly wrong.” Additionally, she said with serious expression, “So far, I’m striking out a lot and she is only seven. It feels really high stakes.” Beyond how parents both internalized and externalized various notions of accountability and choosing schools, it was not, as the dominant rhetoric in the school choice literature and popular media debates suggests, as simple a process as finding the “best” fit, sending your children there, and then being a part of a system that would eventually allow the best schools to succeed and the worst to unravel. In this community, school choice was much more complicated, and parents’ choice processes did not necessarily have a clear beginning or end. For some, the process was ongoing.
I found myself thinking over and over, during the two years whilst I was collecting data, that there were families, children, and even larger communities being immediately and concretely affected in the present whilst the market-based model unfolded in a more abstract way (e.g., Dorn & Potterton, 2017). I met other parents whose feelings of sadness and fear of making a school choice mistake were in many ways similar to Tanya’s. Further, the experiences shared by some Spanish-speaking and English language learning mothers at SLS were encumbered with inequities and injustices as they attempted to navigate a complicated and confusing school choice environment. As Ana’s story in Chapter 5 showed, she did not always feel that her voice was heard. Ana felt that her immediate responsibility as a parent was to gain as much information as she could to help her children. Still, when I spoke with her and others in the class, some did not know what a charter school was. In this sense, Arizona’s market-based model, though established and long-standing, did not feel “mature” to me in its characteristics but, rather, only in the length of time that the model existed.8

According to Alejandra’s earlier explanation in Chapter 5 about parents’ responsibilities and schooling in Arizona, Ana was not fully learning “the game of education in this country.” Such frustrations and pressures for some public school parents who expressed strong love for their children and yet felt disconnected from the public schools where their children attended were time-consuming and at times burdensome. Beyond just choosing schools, the pressures that some parents felt to ensure that students’ grades, and schools’ state-assigned grades, were high was also very important. Alejandra’s expectation, that is, that it is parents’ responsibility to learn how to navigate Arizona’s public school system, revealed how results on standardized tests were, for her, important without question.

8 I thank a scholar at Utah State University for helping me with this idea by talking with me, challenging me, and questioning what I really meant when I said that Arizona’s school choice market was “mature.”
She said, “It is important that we have good grades in this school. If we are a C and others come from another state then they won’t want to come here!” Alejandra’s heartfelt comment assumes, though, that everyone comes to Arizona already understanding that they have the option to enroll their children in a wide range of public schools beyond their neighborhood schools, or that they have sufficient resources to learn “the game of education.” One mother, whose children attended SLS when they were young, acknowledged the inequities apparent in Arizona’s school choice policies and programs:

But we knew about this school two years before he ever went there. We had gone and visited and talked to teachers and got to know them, watched what they did, before he ever went. Most people don’t have that luxury.

“About Being in Between, Like Growing up on the Border”

Violeta is a mother who was connected, although not by community residence, to the Spanish-speaking parents at SLS through her friendships and previous position supporting families as a community specialist staff member. She was also very informed about her options to open-enroll her children. She was “walking the line” with other parents when describing her choice to allow her son to attend a nearby charter school. At the time of our interview, Violeta worked in an organization to support students who were living in poverty. She deeply struggled with the decision to send her son to the charter school, and she valued the notions of equity, access, and justice for all public school students, not just those with already abundant resources. She was politically active, was involved with AIG, and was also personally engaged with the education market in Arizona. As a staunch supporter of public education, she expressed how the way she navigates telling others where her son attends school is confusing and sometimes awkward:
When I first started this job [supporting students in public schools who were living in poverty], I went to go visit the schools… we were expanding… and we were explaining the process and what to do and we were there with the principal. They asked [a colleague] about where his kids go to school and he’s like, “They go to a charter school.” And the principal’s like, “Don’t you ever walk into a room full of educators, public school teachers, and say that!” She was giving him a hard time.

Amanda: The principal…

Violeta: At one of the public schools there. And I did not disclose at all, because my kids go to charter schools! She was like, “You better be careful saying that.” …It’s kind of weird ‘cause I know we’re so polarized in terms of, like, public school people saying, “Oh, why are you joining the charter schools? It’s terrible!” And then there’s these zealots in charter schools that say, “Oh school choice, this is beautiful, we should have school choice and everything should be…” And I’m like, “Excuse me, it’s not okay, either!” So, I feel like I’m in the middle. We were just talking about this the other day, over the weekend, about being in between, like growing up on the border. Talking about the border being an open wound and not belonging in one or the other. It’s just like, “Oh, that’s interesting because it’s what’s happening all over…” We really belong at [EMO charter school], but I can’t claim that my kids don’t go to public school, so it’s just weird.

Violeta poignantly described, in terms of private versus public identities in Arizona, her feelings about “the border being an open wound and not belonging in one or the other,” which, she felt, also complicated school choice processes for herself and some others.

It is significant to consider how Violeta connected her feelings about school choice, her individual versus collective civic responsibilities and tensions that she faced when
choosing, and her experiences with growing up on the border of Mexico and the United States. Violeta compared her own childhood experience of being bussed to a farther away public school in Arizona “to integrate” as being key for schools today. Violeta mentioned Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), a Chicana activist and author who wrote in her rich, strong, and bilingual prose about growing up in the borderline spaces between Mexico and the United States with multiple identities. Violeta said that her own awareness of her “brownness” came later, when she was an adult. As a child, she never felt like bussing was being forced upon anyone. Violeta held, “It might have been happening, I have no idea, but I didn’t feel it among my peers. I was never conscious of my brownness until 1070 [a strong anti-illegal immigration bill in Arizona that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2012], and now with Trump being…” [Violeta’s conversation trailed off here]. Violeta intuitively compared Trump’s candidacy and campaigning to her identity and experiences as a mother who was navigating a school choice market for her children alongside civic engagement, and her thoughts suggested an awareness of the segregative tendencies of public schooling in Arizona today (e.g. Powers, 2014).

Violeta referred to Gloria Anzaldúa’s book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (1987) confronts, for example, the racism, fear, and cultural clashes possible among the people and cultures of the Southern border and Texas, a land that was once “the *tejanos* (native Texans of Mexican descent)” until *tejanos* lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 6) in the 1800s. Anzaldúa calls for a *new mestiza* consciousness of surviving in the borderlands, not only physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. She also calls for being aware of the ambiguity and contradictions in a clashing space of mixed heritages, hierarchies, cultures, beliefs, and identities, and for living *sin fronteras* (without borders):
To survive the Borderlands

You must live *sin fronteras*

be a crossroads. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 217)

Violeta was conscious of an ambiguous future for some Mexicans and Mexican-Americans related to the most recent presidential elections, and she brought this up alongside a discussion about school choice. She named Anzaldúa (1987) when thinking about her own awkward experiences with school choice policies and programs and her children’s attendance at charter schools. Such was survival for Violeta “in between” and “on the border,” which included coming to terms with her choices to make private decisions and still fight publicly for the common good. Like Lynn in many ways, Violeta’s participation in schooling involved both civic duties and market engagement. This type of participation created, for Violeta, an “in between” space. Again, community and civic engagement and market engagement coexisted in a space, even if it was uncomfortable.

Violeta’s openness to talk about how she felt public versus private tensions as an Hispanic Mexican woman, mother, and professional who was working to support students in low-income areas in an increasingly blurred public/private schooling system, vividly revealed her frustrations. Violeta exposed a deeply-rooted issue surrounding Arizona’s schooling policies and practices by drawing connections between race, segregation, and immigration issues. She saw troubles, including those related to schooling, that different groups of families faced in an increasingly competitive, and potentially more discriminatory, country. Violeta did not see this tension disappearing. Rather, she acknowledged a more uncertain and developing educational policy atmosphere in her statement: “…and now with Trump being…”

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Violeta touched on a relevant issue for many people who live in Arizona. Policies and programs, including school choice policies, have the potential to exacerbate or lessen inequalities among different groups of people. How Arizona’s residents will experience developing policies along the Southern border and, more broadly, the borderlands, matters, and this includes how school choice policies may develop over the coming years with increasingly strong federal and state support. As for the new mestiza’s coping strategies in this new policy space, Anzaldúa (1987) says that one copes by:

developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode — nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 79)

Thus, Violeta was confronted with the challenges of the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) not only physically, but also emotionally in ways that she could directly relate to her experiences in Arizona’s school choice policy landscape. For her, Violeta’s own experiences with schooling had changed, and so had the wider society. She understood the contradictions and unjust stratification that existed in this blurred public/private school space, and this has relevance for broader considerations about education markets.

For Violeta, choosing schools was not an easy process, nor was it something she would easily walk away from if there were aspects that she did not like. Instead, in choosing schools for the children that she loved so much, she acknowledged how she was confronted with serious contradictions and problems. Her descriptions evoked Anzaldúa’s (1987) descriptions of not belonging in one place or another. Near the end of our interview, Violeta said:
Something that helped me was when a friend of mine told me, “You have to separate your public self from your private self. You want the best thing for your kids and you’re going to make the best choices for your kids.” And that’s the way you have to look at it. You can still go out there and fight publicly for the rights for all children in the state. You could still fight the fight, but you can still personally make the best choice for your child that’s available. I mean, what are you going to do? Is it like, well, “I’m not going to eat organic because they can’t eat organic?”

**Parental Pressures and School Cultures**

One mother, whose children are now adults, had a perspective on school choice that was gently optimistic, even though she knew that she was not in the process of choosing schools at that moment. Marie, along with other parents who liked the potential benefits of school choice and the flexibility that school choice could provide in helping to meet the needs and passions of individual children, also spoke about the strong pressures that she felt were being forced on some students to perform. As parents were choosing schools for their children, and as they searched for the best schools, they might feel pressure to choose schools with the highest rankings, highest community profiles, or to, as one district public school leader said, choose what is currently “trendy.” According to some stakeholders, such a decision could potentially mean that children ultimately were placed in an environment that might or might not be healthy for them, or in places that might lead them to have narrowly-focused learning experiences. Parents’ efforts to choose the best school for their children had the potential, for some parents, to place unjustifiable stress on students in the process.

Other parents felt a deep sense of accountability and responsibility to provide their children with better opportunities that the ones they had. One father’s description of schools being a place where children should feel safe and free to “be themselves,” was also
observable when he very sensitively shared about his own experiences in high school. He connected his experiences to a changing culture that, today, might be “seeing a need” to provide school spaces for young adults to feel included. In choosing schools for his daughter, he was directly affected by his own personal experiences and he felt a great responsibility to provide a safe space for her. He even thought that a new “culture” of schooling, including charter schools like the one where his wife worked, could be helping with this, too:

I mean, everyday in high school, every single day, I was either pushed around by somebody, or I was called a [derogatory name], because I pierced my ears, and dyed my hair and wore all black. …I’m not kidding you, it was every single day. Because I didn’t walk the line that other kids thought you were supposed to walk, I was considered this crazy freak. We would walk into stores, into a department store, and people would follow us like we were criminals. I mean, it was a different culture, but I think that, because of people like us becoming adults and seeing a need and working toward things… I mean I look at things like people accepting people who are covered in tattoos now and not blinking, people having dyed hair… a lot of times people don’t even notice, they don’t pay attention to it anymore because it is becoming engrained in culture. And I don’t wanna sound conceited about it, but I think that my generation of people who grew up like me… who were constantly abused, we’re like, “That’s stupid. People can just be what they wanna be,” and schools like the one my wife works at are creating a culture where the kids… can go somewhere where they can feel included.

For him, a different type of parental accountability in school choice, one that was more acutely related to what schools were offering in terms of a sense of “culture,” was evident. 
Other parents also spoke about “culture.” Ellie and Marcus had a child who would be attending SLS for kindergarten. In making their choice, they talked about their careful process, about including their preschooler in their decision-making process, and about where they agreed and disagreed about what was important for them as parents to their son:

Marcus: I didn’t like [a nearby school] from the get-go.

Amanda: Okay, can I ask why?

Marcus: The culture.

Ellie: The parents.

Marcus: I didn’t really vibe on the cultural, “We’re great, we know we’re great,” and that kind of thing. Academics to me is probably third our fourth on the list. Diversity, class size, comfort, those are the things that really matter to me because I think we’re talking about the difference between an A school and an A- school or A+ school. We’re not talking about the difference between a school here and then one with metal detectors. Any of the choices we made would have been good, but how do we feel about the school and how [their child] felt when we ultimately had him finally look at a couple of these schools? How did he feel? [These] were things that we thought were of critical importance.

Ellie: This is where we differed a little bit, because I really do want the academics and there are some resources and some extra boosts that come with going to a wealthy school, whether we like it or not. They just have some benefits and it will lead to other schools, etc., whereas going from SLS where I am, honestly, a little worried about the academics and the rigor, I do think it will be harder to go to the next step at other schools.
Ellie really liked the culture at SLS, though, and so she felt confident about keeping a close eye on the academic pieces of how their son was learning. Ellie said:

   Whereas, the feeling at SLS where you can show up at any time, go help in the classroom, go meet your kid, have lunch with your kid, and the fact that there’s mixed grade classrooms, really added the component where they have to adapt to your kid. So, whereas I don’t think the classroom is going to be necessarily rigorous enough for my kid, because I’m just hard… I do have the option to go in there and say, “You know what, I think he’s mastered that, let’s talk about what else he can do and I’ll help you, whatever you want me to do to get him onboard.” I feel like I could do that with the teachers there that I could never do at [a nearby school] or another school.

Overall, Ellie and Marcus appreciated that SLS was a school that was open and welcoming for parents, and they both felt like they had the resources and the invitation to work alongside teachers at the school to help their son in whatever ways were necessary.

Some parents faced pressure and a heavy weight when choosing their child’s trajectory for schools and, more and more commonly, the social and cultural “niche” of which they would then take part. One parent who is also a teacher and has children who are now adults talked with me about the strain she saw being placed on parents with young children as they navigated choosing schools. She said:

   I feel sorry for young parents, there’s so much pressure put them… I remember reading an article several years ago where it said if you don’t pick the right preschool, they won’t get into the right college. I hope that’s not true.
Parents with young children who were navigating schooling for their children also talked about the emotional process of choosing schools. Anxiety and frustration was apparent in a number of Tanya’s comments:

> There’s always, like, an Achilles’ heel to everything. And that’s, like, the difficulty with any choice. No matter where we go, I think I’ll have some buyer’s remorse. [There will be a lot] of struggles at the beginning and we’ll be like, “Oh, did we make the right choice?” Maybe that other one would’ve done this better. This part would’ve been better there. So there’s never a perfect thing.

This realization was also reflected in Marissa’s explanation to me that, although there were aspects of the charter school’s curriculum at her children’s school that she strongly disliked, she was faced with the understanding that, if she took them out of the charter school, she would never have a place for them again because “the waitlist on that school is impossible.”

Carla remembered how hard every decision was when she removed her children from one school and placed them into another school, one being SLS. Later, she moved her children from SLS to a charter school. Although her perspective now is that she “lamented over every decision” yet everything worked out for one of her children, she explained how difficult it was at the time when she was struggling to find the right setting for him:

> So that was just a bad experience. We pulled him out in seventh grade and put him back at [a local private school]. So he did his final year, eighth grade, back at [the private school] again. So that poor kid had been in one, two, three, four schools, all within two miles of each other.

Appendix H presents the above-described thoughts in a table (H1); that is, of the mother whose children are now adults alongside three other stakeholders’ feelings about their own choosing processes.
Other parents seemed to view the stress involved with school choice as sometimes too much to handle. As Marissa demonstrated, waitlists were potentially powerful in influencing families’ decisions about their children’s schooling. One parent, Joan, explained her dislike of school choice lottery systems which, according to one EMO’s website, are used to randomly place families on a waitlist when there are more applications than places available:

And then I started looking into [a school in the area], but the drive was too far. And I don’t like the lottery system. The lottery system, if I ever learned that something had a lottery… I just didn’t want to deal with a lottery. And all my girlfriends were doing lottery so they were all totally stressed out with the lottery system. So that was one thing.

Joan spoke again later in our conversation about her friends whose children were in the lotteries at various schools in the area. She said that one friend decided to “go to Agave,” one of the nearby district public schools. She asked a friend:

“Why are they going to Agave?” And she says, “Because they got so stressed out not [being] given those lotteries [not being chosen off of the waitlist at the charter school] that they just chose the school that was closest to them and they just chose Agave.” So after a while I think parents just get stressed and choose, just to get in. They’ve got to choose somewhere!

As noted earlier, Tanya’s daughter attended five schools and she was preparing for a sixth move by the start of second grade. Tanya’s love for her only child, and her desire to ensure that she would be happy and successful in school, deeply affected her, and this was obvious during my time with her. Tanya was visibly tearful when we talked about her concern for her daughter’s happiness and her feelings that she had failed her up to this point in her
education. Quite sadly, she said near the end of a long conversation about the choices she makes for her daughter and her schooling, “… And this is it, maybe, that I will never be satisfied.” The quest for the best social and cultural school setting for her daughter had become, in some ways, an unreachable summit. Tanya was internally struggling with how this might affect her elementary school-aged daughter, and she even talked about her hopes for where she will attend college. She expressed a genuine fear of failing her daughter because of her immediate school choice process. In an informal conversation during my fieldwork, one parent commented that she thought more about her child’s preschool than her parents ever thought about her college.

Finally, some parents felt that it was very important to not only choose a good school, but to provide a good social experience for their child. For example, Shannon talked about how important it was for her to provide the experience for her son that both she and her husband had growing up:

And now being a parent myself, it’s really, really important that we stay rooted and that our child has roots and that he has the same friends his whole life. Because, I’m closest to the kids I grew up with there and have known my whole life versus kids that I graduated high school with… We drive by [her husband’s] old house all the time.

So it’s really important for us that we stay in the same spot. Unfortunately, Shannon was really struggling with this goal. She saw firsthand the contradictions with her quest to put down roots and to create a close-knit community with other families around her in a neighborhood where parents sent their children to many different elementary schools. After moving her child a number of times and settling on homeschooling him, Shannon shared the trouble that she was having making and keeping social and cultural ties, even with others in her homeschooling group of parents and children.
who she needed to meet up with at pre-planned activities rather than in unstructured settings:

One thing that we all agree on is there’s just not enough down time for these kids. We’ve lost a lot of friendships over that scenario, because everybody wanted us to get involved in ballet and gymnastics and jazz and piano and all these other activities so that our kids could be together, and it’s like you can’t really be together if you’re being told what to do all day long… We have to go out of our way to meet at parks and that type of scenario versus just opening up the door and saying, “Hey, go down the street to Tommy’s house.” So that’s the kind of community I wish we could have. And I know that it’s in little pockets. We have a friend… and their little neighborhood is, literally, just a circle. And there’s more and more families that are moving in there with boys and so it’s kind of a free for all. You just send the kids out the door and everybody can come and go through everybody’s house without knocking. It’s a family community environment. And I grew up with that kind of scenario, so that’s the one thing I wish we could have. And I know it’s somewhere. I know there’s lots of places in the world that still have that, we just don’t have that here.

Although she had made the choice to homeschool her son, Shannon felt pressure and a desire to also create a close-knit and unstructured social environment for him, much like the more traditional neighborhood public schools that she and her husband had experienced in their own childhoods. Yet, the process of school choice was important for her, as was shown in her actions. She knew that her struggles to make connections with other families would be ongoing, and that she would be constantly re-evaluating and justifying to her
husband, extended family members, and even to herself, where and how her child would have school.

**Conclusion**

I explained in this chapter the ways in which stakeholders interpreted “accountability,” and how these perceptions, experiences, and emotions drove a lot of families’ processes of schooling. I observed strong feelings, including anxiety, excitement, love, fear, worry, confidence, and uncertainty in stakeholders’ school choice processes. At the same time, I observed that they used reasoned evaluations of schools, based on their perceptions and own research, to make sense of their choices (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Alongside the emotions and reasoned evaluations that influenced their school choices, I also saw the ways in which parents internalized and acted upon the increasing pressures connected to market-based school choice models.

Despite the many ways they understood “accountability,” I argue that pressures associated with parental accountability trumped many of the other factors that affected their choices. Some parents were reluctant to make choices that increased inequalities for some students. They certainly were careful to “not fail” their own children, too. When these contradictory pressures were added to the act of choosing schools in a system that placed a strong priority on student performance, high-stakes standards, competition, and an abundance of parental choice options, some stakeholders felt that the process was highly pressurized, stressful, and, sometimes, deeply unsatisfying. Alternatively, some parents did not internalize this pressure and said that their choices were not stressful at all, but that they were still prepared to do whatever they had to do if things were not going well for their children.
Yet there were parents who did not have the same resources and access to participate in this school choice system. In the final chapter, Chapter 8, I discuss how an increased pressure for parents to negotiate the school choice market in this community had aspects that were sometimes beneficial yet also potentially injurious — particularly, but not only, for parents without an abundance of resources and knowledge about school choice policies and programs.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The relationships that I started to build with Sarah and Josh, as described in Chapter 1, shaped this dissertation’s focus. In the first chapter, I described how I came to know Sarah and Josh and began to spend time with them to learn more about the strategic work that they were doing in the neighborhoods around their children’s school, SLS. The determination and drive that I saw in Sarah and Josh are qualities that I, as a mother, teacher and school leader, researcher, and citizen, deeply admire. The thoughtful approaches to the work of AIG members towards efforts to promote social justice and equity for people and public spaces, such as in the areas of schools, health care reform, and prison reform, contain lessons and real-life testimonies that politicians, policymakers, and leaders in public and private spaces can always do well to better understand. I wanted to better understand the important ways that they were using real-life stories of people’s experiences to humanize policies and practices, and I am so grateful that they invited me to be a part of their ongoing journey.

I would come to find out that the journey was taking unexpected turns. As I came to meet many other people at SLS and in the school’s surrounding area, the school went through a period of difficult changes that continue, up to the point of this writing, to challenge its existing culture and teaching and learning model. At the same time, the district leaders’ focus honed in on the school’s performance whilst the Arizona legislature was and is continuing to consider more bills that further expand school choice policies and programs. Through it all, I saw how individuals who cared greatly for Arizona’s public school system could diverge in their actions when it came to making decisions about their own children’s
immediate well-being. As a mother, I empathized with many of the hard and emotional conversations that parents shared with me as they struggled to make choices in this competitive and incentivist public school system (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011) that encouraged the schools to fight for resources against one another. Parents, given the ability, were, in some ways compelled to take part in this business-like system that they did not necessarily like, especially because the public schools were struggling financially. Since funding followed the student, sending their children to charter schools inevitably meant that more money would be going to the charter schools and less to the district public schools. Teachers and school leaders talked about how these policies played a role in their professional responsibilities and how they affected their priorities.

Summary of the Findings

The findings in this study highlight a number of important issues and implications for further research. First, in Chapter 4, I showed how Sarah, Josh, and Lynn, despite making different choices, all shared an ethical commitment to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity. These ideals were realized on the ground in different ways. Sarah, Josh, and Lynn, specifically, demonstrated this care through community- and institution-level organizing and through actively engaging with neighbors, parents, and interested individuals to promote public education, to challenge market-based systems, and to encourage civic engagement. They understood and spoke of the importance of schooling for the common good. They also grappled openly with the problems that they also viewed in the district public school system. The work of AIG’s institution members was focused on promoting civic engagement and challenging unhealthy market practices, which they viewed as manifesting in the expansion of some EMOs throughout the state and nationally. They also promoted the importance of a healthy market, wherein practices at charter schools are
shared openly and are accountable to the public. For AIG, civic engagement meant taking part in challenging what they viewed as harmful to the common good.

Second, I found that some proponents drive market-based school choice ideas in Arizona on the faulty assumption that parents are equally able to collect information to make the best choices for their children. There were inequalities in how some stakeholders were able to access individuals at schools, collect information to inform their understandings, and generally, how they were able to take part in learning “the game of education in this country,” as Alejandra shared. For example, some parents experienced blocks when navigating the public school system due to language barriers. I only spoke to a small number of parents for whom this was an issue, and further research in this critical area will help to better reveal what may be happening. This is also important for considering if policymakers look upon Arizona as a model for growing school choice systems elsewhere, because my analysis showed that some parents’ lack of participation in school choice programs had little to do with motivation and skills but rather inaccessibility.

Third, parents’ school choice processes were directly framed, in some instances, around the immediate circumstances that were occurring at SLS. It was not the case that parents made a choice about their children’s schooling and that the choice was permanent and complete. Rather, school choice was more like a cycle that parents were always on, and this cycle often drove conversations, actions, and interactions with teachers, staff, and among friends. Their option to exit, so long as they were able, was always a consideration. Thus, schools could be in flux as they worked to keep parents so that high-performing “competitors” would not attract families, especially in times of difficulties, such as those faced at SLS. The conflict that built up at SLS over curricular changes, the drop in the school’s state-assigned grade, shifting demographics, state and local funding problems, and
communication problems with the administration all created a sense of what Josh described as “fragility.” According to Josh, these conditions created a perfect environment for charter schools to be “predatory.” The cycle that parents were always on, which provided them with an option to exit schools to attend elsewhere, could be evident elsewhere as school choice systems continue to expand.

Fourth, stakeholders’ experiences at SLS and in the surrounding community were shaped by a complex set of factors that affected their choices. These experiences and perceptions did not fit into neat categories that allow for defining school choice, in this case, as a “good” or “bad” movement. Rather, experiences and influences changed circumstantially, as did stakeholders’ viewpoints on school choice in general. It is helpful to pay attention to these details for the potential intended and unintended consequences of school choice programs to be better understood in the future (Berends, 2015). For example, all parents’ feelings, and the reasoning that they employed when choosing schools (Altenhofen et al., 2016), unsurprisingly had their children’s best interests at heart. However, in most cases parents still expressed the desire to support their area’s traditional public schools and did not want the schools to suffer as a result. Parents grappled in very serious ways with the potential consequences of their decisions and of Arizona’s market-based public school system more generally even as many ultimately chose charter schools.

Fifth, relatively affluent parents who had enrolled their children in one particular high-profile charter school were, according to numerous stakeholders, imagining and building their own neighborhood community near the school by purchasing real estate. Here, they were re-creating boundaries where open enrollment had aimed to disrupt them (Friedman, 1955). This may or may not be an unintended consequence of growing school choice policies and programs. It is certainly not surprising that parents like to be close to
their children’s school, and it is easy to see how it is appealing to have other children who also attend the school living nearby. This particular group of parents took a very interesting stake in a community that they were building via their social and economic capital. To recall, one EMO shared that Arizona’s public schools were perhaps being “revolutionized.” It may or may not be intentional that the creation of such boundaries will inevitably, as discussed by Cobb-Roberts et al. (2006) and Putnam (2000), exclude others in new ways as market ideals drive the school system. Rather than exclusion through typical traditional public school district-legislated boundaries and government-regulated control, nonprofit and for-profit EMOs and those who had a stake in the schools were using the market to re-imagine their own “neighborhood” schools.

Finally, this study contributes to the school choice literature by documenting parents’ experiences with pressure in making school choices. Parents’ stress resulted from knowing their choices could potentially benefit their children and also potentially harm their children. This was something of which some parents were aware, and an outcome of organizing schools in this way made the process of enrolling children into school a quite difficult experience for many stakeholders. For some parents, they were constantly aware of how schools were performing in comparison to one another, and this further increased stress for some families.

Contributions to the Literature

Fragility of Public School Institutions in a School Choice Market

As explained, there were two particular influences on families’ choices in this study, both of which were ultimately driven by complex feelings of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, reasoned evaluations (Altenhofen et al., 2016), and a desire to make good choices. Parents focused on notions of community and ideas about accountability. As described in
Chapter 7, one district school leader explained how, for a school to be sustainable in a high-stakes school choice environment, “You have to either mold with what’s happening or you sink.” SLS was changing, and parents were finding themselves considering whether to stay or to leave. Josh pointedly spoke of the “fragility of institutional life” when competitive fights for public resources fuel conflict. This, of course, is a premise of market-based school choice systems, and my analysis highlights how people experienced competitive policies and programs at SLS and in other nearby schools.

Chapters 4 through 7 illustrated the strong market element that was at play at SLS and in the surrounding community as people engaged with schools and school choice policies and programs. Chapter 4 provided a cornerstone for the rest of the findings in the study by showing how demographic changes and the increasing pressure for students to perform well on high-stakes standardized tests resulted in tensions for some stakeholders, which also affected their actions. As stakeholders at SLS faced these tensions and acted on them, some learned strategies for playing Arizona’s education game, similar to a mother in André-Bechely’s (2005) West Coast city. If they had the social capital and cultural resources that helped them to make choices possible, then they could exit or at least threaten to exit and take their “services” elsewhere. Such actions exacerbated the stress placed on SLS and the district as schools and school leaders labored to maintain enrollment numbers and the associated funding. DPSS was facing competition from newly opened EMO charter schools and, thus, needed to stay attractive to area residents.

Chapters 4 and 5 also highlighted the ways in which people engaged with their chosen school and surrounding schools including, but not limited to, charter schools. I showed that a common misunderstanding about SLS permeated the community. Many people considered the school to be “alternative” in the sense that it served the “bad” kids
and, so, in a competitive environment, some stakeholders would never consider placing their child there. Most, but not all, stakeholders understood that their involvement in the school and continued enrollment was a choice, and that they could revisit that choice at any time. Still, some stakeholders staunchly supported SLS despite challenges that it was facing to maintain relevance in the district. This caused some stakeholders to come together to resist moves towards increasing marketing efforts at SLS. Stakeholders interpreted and acted on, at times, fragile notions of “community,” or they worked to maintain “community,” even though their interpretations about what this meant sometimes differed.

An important area to consider for future research is what happens to the long-standing district public schools, like SLS, that have been in the district since the infancy of school choice programs. How have the schools changed? Why? Of course, SLS is a district school of choice and therefore has unique characteristics. Still, it is important to think about how social and cultural shifts occur alongside the growth of charter schools and other school choice programs and how, and in what ways, the schools can sustain in a competitive market.

**Parental Accountability**

In Chapter 7, I examined the ways in which individuals internalized and then acted on notions of “accountability.” Competitive models for schooling that were impressed upon SLS and surrounding community stakeholders resulted in a strong perception of parental accountability, an area of accountability that has so far been underdeveloped in the literature. Parents’ decisions about their child’s schooling were intense, often emotionally stressful, in some senses cyclical since they were ongoing and not static. Further, they revealed contradictions between responsibilities to public institutions and pressures to make
individual, private choices. Many stakeholders recognized the socioeconomic and racial inequities in this system, and yet had to make immediate decisions for their children.

I found that stakeholders’ views were malleable, and were constructed and reconstructed as situations changed. There was a heavy feeling of responsibility on parents to make the right choices that were, of course, of very high importance to them. Also, some stakeholders were aware of a “Like it or leave it” attitude about schooling in Arizona. If they made a choice that did not work out for their children, the failure was, for some parents, perceivably only on them. In such a case, they had not found the right community or the right model for their children and they would have to search elsewhere once again. An area for future research here is to consider how these types and numbers of school changes through parental choice affect students.

Parents even had an option to solicit family and friends to support their children’s private school education, which donors would get back 100% at the end of the year through a tax credit, as Joan discussed. Numerous parents talked about private school tax credits and whether they took part in the programs, and one parent shared that she supported a family members’ private education because she had the finances to do this, even though she did not necessarily like the tax credit program. In some ways for parents who supported public schools, tax credits and other options were both appealing and contradictory at the same time. As I illustrated, stakeholders realized that not everyone could transport their children across town, nor was it reasonable to assume that everyone has a social network of families, friends, and acquaintances with an abundance of savings to “give” via tax credit donations for children’s private school tuition.

Again, the notion that parents in a school choice system all have equal access to school choice policies and programs was demonstrated to be illusory. “The game of
education in this country,” as named by Alejandra, complicated equal access at SLS and for surrounding community stakeholders, and required an intricate understanding of how policies and programs work within schools. A striking example of how individuals unequally accessed schools is through the purchase of real estate to be close to a charter school. On the other hand, a group of Spanish-speaking parents nearby had an increasingly difficult time navigating their children’s schools because of language barriers, such as when Ana said that she did not pay her rent so that her son, in her understanding, could take a class that he needed because of a mistake on the school’s part.

I was also asked during my time at the English language classes what a charter school was. The gap in parents’ schooling experiences highlights the stark contrast in how parents understood and could take part in Arizona’s school choice system. To this end, it is reasonable to surmise that parents who knew more about open enrollment options for district public schools, charter schools, and private schools were the parents who were more likely to use them. If market-oriented school choice proponents truly care about increasing equity, then this finding is problematic, since the policies and practices are not being utilized by those for whom they were originally envisioned.

In this way, my findings contribute to the extant literature surrounding the effects of school choice policies and programs from the perspectives of a range of school and surrounding community stakeholders. The fragility of public schools in a market-based public school choice system, and a better understanding of parental accountability and the intense pressures placed upon families in a market-based public school choice system, should not be ignored as school choice policies and programs continue to expand across the United States. As many of the parents in this study demonstrated, unfettered choice had the potential to be discomforting and unsatisfying, and it even caused at least one parent to feel
like maybe no school would be good enough. Yet parents were open to the potential for schools of choice to offer unique opportunities for students, and most also openly cared for traditional public schools.

Finally, it is helpful to understand that, as parents “walked the line” between choices that were good for their family and those that were good for public schools and society, their perceptions and actions sometimes developed and, in some cases, changed. Just as I began this study with Sarah, I finish here with her experiences. Sarah’s story of navigating schooling in Arizona is still very much in progress. Her love and staunch support for SLS and public schooling in general is clearly strong, and her passion, leadership, and advocacy work is admirable. Over the time that I was in the field, the fallout at SLS and Sarah’s increasing frustrations with Arizona’s education policies became very upsetting for her. She opposed policies that she felt were unfair in many ways, and even encouraged her children to opt out of standardized exams on testing days, a political act of resistance that Mitra, Mann, and Hlavacik (2016) suggest can provide opportunities “in which stakeholders could question the validity of policy and develop their agency…” (p. 15). Eventually, Sarah, exhausted and saddened, pulled her children from SLS. One of her children is now attending a small arts-based charter school.

Sarah, like most people with whom I spent time, was not against charter schools per se. She, like many other stakeholders, was against unfettered free-market policies built on the assumption that these programs could lead to better schools for all. Most stakeholders were not duped by this proposal and, in fact, struggled quite openly with the problems that they had with some school choice options in their area. Still, some moved their children multiple times across traditional public, charter, and private schools. As I described in Chapter 6, unfettered choice, one mother claimed, was also ironically moving schools
towards conformity as they fought to keep up with each other. Josh recognized the phenomenon of district public schools, in some ways, having their hands tied as they tried to “out-charter the charters.” And one father’s opinion was that charter schools worked best when they did not try to overtake public schools through competition. They had a place, but not the only place, and certainly not one that needed to be explained through theories of “winning” and “losing.”

Although Arizona is viewed as a school choice experiment in the “Wild West” (Maranto & Gresham, 1999), parents and children are affected in the present moment. It is important to view local contexts, or the “small,” with a “big” lens (Greene, 1995), to portray the individuals and groups in this community as humanized and significant “in their integrity and particularity” rather than as “objects of chess pieces” in a system (p. 10). Parents’ decisions needed to be immediate and could not wait for markets to work themselves out. And so, parents’ lines were sometime drawn and then re-drawn in the sand, as were Sarah’s. For some stakeholders, per Violeta’s description, life and public schooling “on the border” in Arizona was becoming increasingly strained, and possibly more so, “now with Trump being…”

Implications

Market-based policies and practices are becoming increasingly prevalent and taken-for-granted as a part of institutional life in the United States (Klein, 2017). The exploration of school choice policies’ unfolding in local settings and, specifically, in Arizona, a state with a well-established market-based system, can be helpful for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. This study offers questions for future research beyond this dissertation.

Other questions include some of the following: What were the macro-level forces that resulted in the district’s multiple failed bond overrides, leaving its public schools
strapped for resources in a geographic area that is otherwise known for its large amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital? How do community members who exit (Hirschman, 1970) SLS and other district public schools in the DPSS to attend charter schools perceive and imagine the notion of neighborhood schooling? Can Arizona’s long-standing market-based policies and practices serve as a point of reference for other states as their school choice policies and practices grow? How might these findings affect commonly held assumptions about neighborhood and community schools in the United States and beyond? In what ways do parents’ fears of failing their children affect their decisions in a school choice market? What will happen for stakeholders and schools in states, such as Kentucky, where the school choice movement is in its infancy?

The school and surrounding community in which this study took place has experienced significant changes in the midst of expanding school choice reforms. Relatively few scholars have conducted studies related to Arizona’s charter schools, and no research has provided an in-depth ethnographic description of Arizona’s education market “on the ground.” Maranto, Laczko-Kerr, and Vasile (2015) observed that, “…Arizona charter schools offer the closest American equivalent to a long term, state-wide public education market. Yet, few academics have studied Arizona charter schools, perhaps since the reality of school choice on the ground confounds those seeking easy answers” (p. 2). This study begins to fill this gap by exploring, through the lens of one district public school and its surrounding community, stakeholders’ experiences with school choice. The study engages the ways in which people’s “small” stories humanize big policy issues, and how these stories are shaped by, and also how they problematize, mega-narratives (Greene, 1995; Mehta, 2013; Olson & Craig, 2009) about schools, choice, education markets, and public schooling in general (Katznelson & Weir, 1985).
This study also acknowledges Dumas and Anderson’s (2014) challenge that we, as a research community, can perhaps even do “better” (p. 6) in our service by aiming to understand the ways in which families, young people, and groups might work to, or are already working to, influence policy from the “ground up.” The work of AIG leaders and the organization’s institution and community members provides an example of how researchers can learn from activities and efforts that are occurring in local contexts. Scholars can assist these efforts by making research more accessible (Fischman & Tefera, 2014), and by asking and engaging to learn how universities can be useful to families, young people, and groups in their efforts. Lastly, this study also problematizes ideas about communities in a long-standing market-based school system and acknowledges that parental accountability may be an outcome of this education market that can further complicate stakeholders’ experiences and choices.

Overall, the findings from this study can begin to help us better understand how long-standing school choice policies are affecting local communities and how community organizations and members develop local understandings and interpretations of these policies and practices. This study begins to identify and map the contradictions, problems, and tensions associated with how parents and community members respond to the increasing variations of school choice reforms. And so, the school and surrounding community stakeholders described here can provide insights for others in similar or evolving situations. It is perhaps most fitting to consider how, beyond discussions about possible positive and negative effects of market-based public school choice systems, rich descriptions of social and cultural contexts could be helpful for contextualizing and perhaps even proactively identifying areas where inequalities in school choice programs might proliferate. I believe that conversations about the effects of school choice for stakeholders in local
settings will continue to become even more relevant in the United States and beyond as individuals and groups in local settings, practitioners, and researchers continue to unravel the intended and unintended consequences of the school choice movement.
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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Thank you so much for taking time for this interview. I am interested in your ideas, thoughts, and opinions, and I appreciate whatever you can and are willing to share about the topics. Your responses will be confidential at all times throughout my study, and you are, of course, free to decide that you do not want to participate at any point.

**Background Questions**

- Can you please share with me a bit about your background? Where did you grow up and go to school?

- Where does (do) your child (children) currently attend school?

- How did you come to choose this as the school for your child (children)?
  - Why?

  - How long has (have) your child (children) been at the school? [Has (have) your child (children) attended any other schools?]

  - The school is a district school of choice. How would you describe the school?

  - How would you describe the ways the school has changed, or not, over time?

  - Do you take part in activities at the school?

  - (If yes): In what ways do you participate either with the school or in your child’s (children’s) schooling?

**Questions About School and School Choice Policies**

- Are you familiar with any of the school’s policies and practices?

- [If yes] Are there any policies or practices that are particularly important or noteworthy to you? Why?

- Do you have questions about the school’s policies, or about wider educational policies as a more general issue?
Are you familiar with the school choice options available to you in Arizona? Can you please share what you know about them, and any other thoughts you have about them?

- Have you ever taken part, do you currently take part, or have you ever considered taking part in any of the following school choice options available in Arizona?:

  a) inter- or intra-district open enrollment?

  b) charter schools?

  c) private schools?

  d) tuition tax credit programs?

  e) education tax credits (private or public)?

  f) Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs)?

  g) online learning?

  h) homeschooling?

More School Choice Questions

- Did you consider sending your child (children) to any other schools?

- What were those schools like?

- Why did you choose this school over the other schools you were considering?

- Are there other schools in the area with which you are familiar and didn’t consider?
Do you know of other parents who sent their children to another school besides this one?
  o  (If so): Which schools?
  o  How far are these schools from this one?

Do you know if any of these are charter schools?

Can you please share what you know, generally, about charter schools?

Can you please share what you know, more specifically, about other neighborhood schools in your area? Which can you name? Do you have any thoughts about any of them that you want to share?

How did you learn about the schools that you just discussed above?

Is there anything else you think is important to share with me about your child’s (children’s) school(s) or your experiences that I haven’t asked?

  o  Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX B

LETTER TO SPANISH-SPEAKING PARENTS WITH PROJECT DETAILS
Sábado, 2 de Julio 2016

Querido Padre,

Mi nombre es Amanda Potterton y yo soy un estudiante de cuarto año de doctorado en la Universidad del Estado de Arizona, en Política y Evaluación Educativa. Me llevan a cabo investigaciones relacionadas con las prácticas de elección de escuelas. Mi objetivo es aprender más acerca de las familias y otras partes interesadas acerca de las ideas y experiencias que eligen las escuelas y las políticas de elección de escuelas locales en general. Al escribir mi tesis, mi esperanza es servir a los padres y otras partes interesadas, ayudando a reflejar las voces, experiencias y preocupaciones de lo que es para navegar por las escuelas de Arizona para sus hijos. Sus experiencias son tan importantes, valoro sus voces, y espero aprender de ustedes y compartir estas historias de cómo esto lo más importante que afecta.

¿Usted estaría dispuesto a hablar conmigo en una entrevista informal? Esta entrevista se podría proporcionar con el espacio, si lo desea, para compartir acerca de sus emociones y experiencias con la escolarización aquí como un padre y un miembro de la comunidad que habla español. Estoy interesado en sus ideas, pensamientos y opiniones, y aprecio todo lo que pueden y están dispuestos a compartir acerca de los temas. Sus respuestas serán confidenciales en todo momento a lo largo de mis estudios, y que son, por supuesto, la libertad de decidir que no desea participar en cualquier punto.

Por favor no dude en hacer cualquier pregunta, y yo aprecio que tomarse el tiempo para leer esto y considerar hablar conmigo. Si prefiere hablar en otro momento, estaría feliz por mí en contacto con usted? Si es así, puede usted por favor proporcionar su información de contacto más abajo?

¡Gracias!

Sinceramente,
Amanda Potterton

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Información de Contacto de los Padres de Deslizamiento

Nombre: _____________________________________________
Número de teléfono: _________________________________
Email: ____________________________________________
Mejor Día / hora de conocer: ________________
Saturday, July 2, 2016

Dear Parent,

My name is Amanda Potterton and I am a fourth year Ph.D. student at Arizona State University, in Educational Policy and Evaluation. I conduct research related to school choice practices. My goal is to learn more about families’ and other stakeholders’ ideas about, and experiences with, choosing schools and local school choice policies in general. In writing my dissertation, my hope is to serve parents and other stakeholders by helping to reflect the voices, experiences, and concerns of what it is like to navigate Arizona schools for your children. Your experiences are so important, I value your voice, and I hope to learn from you and share these stories of how this most important thing affects you.

Would you be happy to talk with me in an informal interview? This interview could provide you with space, if you would like, to share about your emotions and experiences with schooling here as a parent and member of the community who speaks Spanish. I am interested in your ideas, thoughts, and opinions, and I appreciate whatever you can and are willing to share about the topics. Your responses will be confidential at all times throughout my study, and you are, of course, free to decide that you do not want to participate at any point.

Please feel free to ask me any questions, and I appreciate you taking the time to read this and to consider talking with me. If you would prefer to talk at another time, would you be happy for me to contact you? If so, can you please provide your contact information below?

Thank you!

Sincerely,
Amanda Potterton

Parent Contact Information Slip

| Name: ____________________________ |
| Phone Number: ____________________________ |
| Email: ____________________________ |
| Best Day/Time to Meet: ____________________________ |
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW ADDENDUM FOR SOME SPANISH-SPEAKING PARENTS
Addendum for Some Families in the Spanish-Speaking Community

How did you come to think of this school as a private school?
Did someone tell you this?
What did they tell you when they came to your door?
Are you aware of the neighborhood public school option?
What appealed to you about [a nearby charter school]?
How do you know that it used to be a Catholic School?
How did you deal with the conflicts you described to me? What do you do? What did you do? What do you plan to do?
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW ADDENDUM FOR SOME SCHOOL LEADERS
Addendum for Some School Leaders

Can you please tell me about [school or charter organization]?
How did you come to be involved with [school or charter organization]?
How did the organization develop?
What are [school or charter organization] plans for the future?
Can you describe some of the successes and challenges?
How would you describe the political climate for charter schools?
How would you describe a school community?
Do you see [school or charter organization] as a place for building local school communities?
How does [school or charter organization] select school locations, both now (existing schools) and for the future?
How would you respond to charter school critics who see charter schools as exacerbating inequalities in district public schools?
Can you tell me about your role?
How does being a parent affect your positionality here?
As I listen back to the interview from when I met with the mothers the second time at the English language learning class, with Ana, Adelina, and Sofía, and when I listen to the important reflection and debrief that [Spanish language translator and colleague] and I had in the car on the way back from the class, I was surprised, at the time, in differences in context between the parents I have previously met with and the mums at this meeting. It made our third meeting, the following week, much better, and that bridge [of understanding and connecting] was shortened, for sure. I listen at the end of the interview when they asked what charter schools are and what they offered, and I hear myself stumbling over myself trying to [figure out where to go from there]! I hadn’t foreseen our conversation going in this direction and my naivety was a problem in that interview. That said, it was an important meeting because I learned. I am really grateful that I had the opportunity to meet with them again the following week because I knew them more and we had trust built, and we were all more comfortable… … when I was talking with [Spanish language translator and colleague], I was anxious that they hadn’t understood the point of why I was there at all…
APPENDIX G

SCHOOL LEADERS' DISCUSSIONS ABOUT MARKETS AND ACCOUNTABILITY
Table G1

*District Public School vs. Education Management Organization (EMO) Leaders’ Discussions About Markets and Accountability*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Points</th>
<th>Data Exemplars</th>
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<td><strong>The district public school leader was concerned with declining enrollment in schools across the DPSS, which could result in school closures.</strong></td>
<td><strong>District School Leader:</strong> “… [the superintendent] admonished us to think of ways to increase our enrollment, and worried that some schools who were in declining enrollment in future years would have the possibility of closing if they didn’t maintain higher numbers. So we took that seriously, because we were in a declining enrollment situation, one because of new charter schools in the area, and also, in the DPSS, it’s a time of declining enrollment as there’s no baby boom.”</td>
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<td><strong>The EMO leader suggested that the organization had decided that they had nearly saturated their charter schools and would not likely open any more in the area.</strong></td>
<td><strong>EMO Leader:</strong> “I don’t think of us as competitors with the district or anything like that. (Pause). I think we’ve gotten to the point where we’ve opened almost all the schools in the [metropolitan] area that we will open so… (pause)… when it comes to recruiting students I don’t think of it in a competitive way.”</td>
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<td><strong>One district public school leader had prepared materials to show parents how competitors’ scores were not always better, in order to dispel myths.</strong></td>
<td><strong>District School Leader:</strong> “When I tour, I show our competitors’ scores compared to ours… [She had prepared information to show this data to prospective parents.]… We’re constantly sharing such things with even our own parents, because that idea that charter schools are better, at least with two main competitors which would be the Masters Group schools and the Strong Establishment schools, is not always the case.”</td>
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<td><strong>Another district public school leader felt that they were trying to keep up with what was “trendy.”</strong></td>
<td><strong>District School Leader:</strong> “We’re very aware of charter schools, we school personnel in the district because you have, um… it is so competitive. People are so trendy in finding the next coolest thing, that’s being getting talked about on the soccer field and baseball field, what is like the next greatest thing that’s gonna help their son or daughter become a doctor. Um, so, yeah, I mean, it’s just more of a commodity in this area.”</td>
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| **One EMO leader’s priority was to compete nationally with schools and did not** | **EMO Leader:** “What I do want, and what I always want, is I wanna be a top-ranked school. So I want, when Arizona results come out, I want to be number one. When the AP
<table>
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<th>Feel that they needed to consider the local district schools.</th>
<th>Another EMO leader felt that, in contrast to the district public school leader’s statement about her school’s superior performance, that public schools were “bad.”</th>
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<td>Another EMO leader felt that, in contrast to the district public school leader’s statement about her school’s superior performance, that public schools were “bad.”</td>
<td>EMO Leader: “The suburban schools are bad. There’s this veil over everybody that, like, you know… or this, this like, dirty secret, ‘Oh this is like, it looks nice, they have really good facilities’… but the instruction’s SHIT!”</td>
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<td>A district school leader talked about how it would be very hard for a single, mom-and-pop charter school to open in the DPSS, because it would be hard to compete against “prestigious” EMOs in the area.</td>
<td>A district school leader talked about how it would be very hard for a single, mom-and-pop charter school to open in the DPSS, because it would be hard to compete against “prestigious” EMOs in the area. Amanda: So you feel like it is specific to where you’re at? District School Leader: … I feel it is. But I can’t imagine [a new charter] school coming onto a market, you know. Like, “I cannot only compete against the public schools, but I can’t compete against the other quote-unquote ‘prestigious’ charter schools, like Strong Establishment and Masters Group, and be in that market myself as a mom-and-pop type of charter school or as a one school charter school. I think it would be very challenging in this area. Because people are very, I mean, they are market driven in this area, and when I say this area, I don’t know how large that area is. I don’t know if that means just my neighborhood around here, but I don’t think that I’m completely being too general in saying that. I would be quasi-confident saying that that would be a pretty good statement for all of the DPSS area.”</td>
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<td>An EMO leader talked about the “savvy” required for strategizing to renew schools in a market-based model. He says that, to grow in the inner city, policymakers should be savvy and “hedge some results come out, I want to be number one. SAT, I want to be number one. So, occasionally there will be schools that top us, but those are at the national level. So uh, when I think of our competitors, I think [names five schools in three other states]. So, these are almost all selective, public magnet schools. Um, those are the schools that I think of as our competition. If we can outdo them, then we’ll be the best schools in the country. I wanna be number one. It’s the same damn school that keeps beating us.”</td>
<td>EMO Leader: “We run small schools but we want to run them at massive scale. Uh, because this is a cultural renewal project… Market language makes sense, too. If policymakers, thinking about themselves as a venture capitalist, where they want to put resources for the sake of some ROI [Return on Investment]… if you’re thinking like a VC, where do I want to put my resources in order to get the most ROI? And again you have to be savvy about that. A</td>
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things” across a platform of suburbs and inner cities. Such distribution of risk is necessary, he said, to get the best Return on Investment (e.g. to have enough money for the schools that require more resources).

| VC is very savvy about all the variables that go into that. You don’t just throw a bunch of money at everything. You do spread your risk around, you hedge some things, you spread, and you invest across a platform, because in the aggregate you’re going to get the ROI you are looking for, and um, hopefully… There’s risk involved, always. Uh, so I think that if the policymakers thought in terms of the return and why are we putting money in these places and what are the terms that we want? Um, in terms of expectations for that ROI? You know, it would make, I think it would make things a lot easier in terms of having a discussion about why we are spending money because what you get otherwise is just, “Oh, they’re just pumping money into a system that is a black hole and nobody knows where it is going and you kind of look the other way.” … We need to make these investments, but in a savvy way. Like a person really truly in a marketplace would do… It's all part of this season of trying to prove something to the policymakers, prove something to the marketplace, to do that in [inner-city neighborhoods] you have to get certain scale in the suburbs and so you go out and you get that scale. Why? Because you also want to be in the inner city. You want to be in every nook and cranny. |
APPENDIX H

NAVIGATING THE EMOTIONAL PROCESS OF SCHOOL CHOICE
Navigating the Emotional Process of School Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Parent Whose Children are Adults</th>
<th>Parents With Young Children Who are Currently Navigating Schooling for Their Children</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>“I feel sorry for young parents, there’s so much pressure put them… I remember reading an article several years ago where it said if you don’t pick the right preschool, they won’t get into the right college. I hope that’s not true.”</td>
<td>“There’s always, like, an Achilles’ heel to everything. And that’s, like, the difficulty with any choice. No matter where we go, I think I’ll have some buyer’s remorse. [There will be a lot] of struggles at the beginning and we’ll be like, ‘Oh, did we make the right choice?’ Maybe that other one would’ve done this better. This part would’ve been better there. So there’s never a perfect thing.” (Tanya)</td>
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<td>“I think the truth is, if I was to pull my kids from [a Masters Group charter school], it’d be a final decision because the waitlist on that school is impossible.” (Marissa)</td>
<td>“It is crazy the kind of struggles, like how many different educational settings… my kids and I have been in… that was so complicated for so long. And in the end, it’s like one of those things that when you’re in it and your kids are young… every decision felt like the weight of the world on my shoulders. I lamented over every decision. And in hindsight, I’m like, ‘Ah, they all came out fine in the end.’ …Wow, I was so stressed out about that… but it’s all evening out.” (Carla)</td>
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EXEMPTION GRANTED

Jeanne Powers
Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation - Tempe
480/965-0841
jeanne.powers@asu.edu

Dear Jeanne Powers:

On 8/12/2014 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>“Different Choices: A Public School Community’s Response to School Choice Reforms”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Jeanne Powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00001422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Title:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
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<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
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| Documents Reviewed: | • 2Edited A. U. Potterton HRP-502a CONSENT.pdf, Category: Consent Form;  
                  • 2Edited A. U. Potterton IRB Pilot Study.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;  
                  • A. U. Potterton Interview Questions.pdf, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); |

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 8/12/2014.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,
IRB Administrator

cc:

Amanda Potterton