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# Different Choices: A Public School Community's Responses to School Choice Reforms

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### Abstract

In the United States, state and federal reforms increasingly encourage the expansion of school choice policies. Debates about school choice contrast various concepts of freedom and equality with concerns about equity, justice, achievement, democratic accountability, profiting management organizations, and racial and class segregation. Arizona's "market"-based school choice programs include over 600 charter schools, and the state's open enrollment practices, public and private school tax credit allowances, and Empowerment Scholarships, (closely related to vouchers), flourish. This qualitative analysis explores one district-run public school and its surrounding community, and I discuss socio-political and cultural tensions related to school choice reforms that exist within the larger community. This community experienced school changes, including demographic shifts, lowered test scores, failed overrides, and the opening of high-profile charter school organizations near the school.

### Keywords

Educational Policy, Social and Cultural Contexts, Ethnographic Methods, School Choice, Charter Schools, Educational Reform, Competition

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## Different Choices: A Public School Community's Responses to School Choice Reforms

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Throughout the United States, federal, state, and local policies are expanding provisions for school choice, which include charter schools, vouchers, tax credits, and intra- or inter-district open enrollment programs (see, for example, Ball, 2009; Burch, 2009; Lubienski, 2009; Powers, 2009). On the one hand, advocates promote school choice policies because of their potential to offer parents and families more options for their children's school instead of being restricted to assigned neighborhood placements. On the other hand, critics argue that school choice policies may encourage segregation and stratification amongst populations of students because of these increased options for students to move schools.

### Why Study Social and Cultural Contexts of School Choice?

These often polarized debates do not help us understand how individuals, families, and community members negotiate this complicated landscape on the ground, nor do we understand the ways in which communities are affected by school choice policies. I addressed this research problem by examining a small group of school and community stakeholders' experiences with market-based choice policies from the viewpoint of one Arizona district public school and its surrounding community. The purpose of the study was to examine two research questions, which are (1) "What are the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders and the surrounding community?" and, (2) "What are socio-political and cultural tensions that exist within the larger community?" My study used ethnographic techniques to provide a general overview of the community and to tease out how stakeholders' interactions with a mature, state-wide education market can at times complement and in other instances disrupt commonly held notions about neighborhood schools, communities, and public spaces.

The objective was to focus on and report descriptive findings from my earliest interactions with individuals in this community. The research for this investigation was conducted from August 2014 to February 2015. My findings suggest that community members

at the district public school and in the surrounding community shared ethical commitments to, and care for: justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity. They navigated the school choice environment with emotion and love. Some stakeholders demonstrated these commitments through strategic political organizing and by “agitating” others to critically think about market-based reforms. Social and cultural tensions also existed. Other community members were “walking the line” between public district schools and high-profile, “high-performing” charters and, as parents, felt conflicted between individual and community public school interests. As market-based policies and practices become increasingly popular and politically supported in the U.S. and internationally, a study that attempts to qualitatively understand how school choice policies unfold in public spaces is timely and relevant. The intended audience for this paper includes stakeholders in school choice settings and policymakers who aim to better understand how school choice is being experienced “on the ground.” The paper may also be useful for other qualitative researchers as they begin fieldwork conducting studies with ethnographic methods, as I describe how I built relationships with parents and others in the community.

## Literature Review

### Understanding School Choice

Over the past two decades, variations of market-based public school choice policies have expanded in most states throughout the country (Center for Education Reform, 2014). According to the competitive school choice model, rationally acting decision-makers will gather all available information about schools to inform their choice of school when they are no longer required to attend their neighborhood public school. On the supply side, markets release schools from institutional bureaucratic control, which allows them to be more nimble and competitive. Choice, then, is understood as the panacea that might “save our schools” (Hepburn, 2001, p. 11; see also Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1955). 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 the competition rhetoric can be misleading since some parents are drawn to school choice for non-market reasons including community empowerment and cultural diversity (Henig, 1994). The fault, some researchers say, is that market processes tend to benefit already advantaged groups (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002). Critics have also warned that school choice markets can exacerbate inequalities in educational opportunities (see arguments by Berliner, Glass, & Associates, 2014; C. Lubienski & S. T. Lubienski, 2014; S. T. Lubienski & C. Lubienski, 2006) through increased segregation (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009; Renzulli & Evans, 2005) and by excluding English language learners and students with special needs (Garcy, 2011; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). Further, school choice practices may encourage schools to selectively “cream skim” elite students (West, Ingram, & Hind, 2006), which could therefore have potential negative achievement effects on traditional public schools (Ni, 2009; Ni & Rorrer, 2012). Market-based choice may also result in decreased democratic accountability for schools (DiMartino & Scott, 2013; Noguera, 1994; Scott & DiMartino, 2009) under new incentivist systems (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2011). The rapid entry of non-profit and profit-making

charter schools and education management organizations (EMOs; Miron & Gulosino, 2013; Robertson, 2015; Saltman, 2014) has also raised questions about the future of public education.

Many quantitative studies focus on assessing student achievement in charter schools compared to traditional public schools.<sup>1</sup> Qualitatively, researchers analyze the more localized effects of charter schools through descriptions of enrollment practices, racial exclusion and class stratification, levels of autonomy, parental choice processes, and effects on parental engagement (see Andre-Bechely, 2005; Bell, 2009; Finnigan, 2007; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Stambach & Becker, 2006; Villavicencio, 2013). These qualitative studies highlight tensions and conflicts between individuals and communities, and education as a public versus a private good. Recently, rich descriptions of markets in schools have helped us to better understand local school leaders' responses to these reforms (Jabbar, 2015), how immigrant youths experience school choice (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014), the strategic marketing of schools and cities aimed at enticing middle-class families into urban public schools (Cucchiara, 2013), and middle-class parents' experiences with being "pushed out" of urban public schools as they attempted to integrate by activating class resources to benefit their children and schools (Horvat, 2012). As distinctions between "public" and "private" lines in education weaken (Ball, 2009; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Burch, 2009), some researchers question how democratic approaches to policy might be compromised if concepts of public welfare and collective action are replaced by economically-oriented market theories and individualistic participation (Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011; Scott & DiMartino, 2009; Whitty & Power, 2000).<sup>2</sup> My study adds to what we qualitatively know about school choice. I document entrenched policy effects "on the ground" (Dumas & Anderson, 2014) by using a lens focused on examining tensions and conflicts at one school and in its wider community to observe long-standing education market effects for stakeholders.

### **School Choice Policies and Practices in Arizona**

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). The report declared that the U.S. educational system was in crisis and in need of radical reform to meet the needs of a competitive global economy (Apple, 2006; Mehta, 2013). This mega-narrative was reflected in Arizona where, in 1992, the state legislature approved largely deregulated charter schools and open enrollment for all public school districts, thus positioning Arizona as a leader in school choice expansion efforts (Powers, 2009; Powers, Topper, & Potterton, 2017). In 2015, Arizona enrolled the second highest percentage of public school children in charter schools after Washington D.C., and approximately 600 charter schools operated in Arizona (Arizona Charter Schools Association, 2015). Further, for-profit EMOs, headed by politically-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, and Walters, 2012; Bifulco and Ladd, 2007; Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013; Forster, 2013; Hoxby, 2003; Hoxby, Murarka, and Kang, 2009; Sass, 2006. Recent reviews of the research include one that, after examining studies of charter schools' effects on student achievement and educational attainment, proposes a focus on the strengths and weaknesses of market and institutional theory (Berends, 2015). Another is a meta-analysis of the effect of charter schools on student achievement (Betts & Tang, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Market-based models for education have been met with resistance in some 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 (see, for example, 2014) describes the passion and defiance of one grassroots community group in New Orleans. The group demanded the reopening of their traditional public school under a charter, which resulted in the school becoming the only charter granted outside of management organizations' collaboration.

influential chief educational officers (CEOs), oversee a growing number of the state's charter schools (Miron & Gulosino, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

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 (see Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000; Keegan, 2017; Maranto & Gresham, 1999; Strauss, 2018). 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). Whilst 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 increasing the role of the private sector in education. Charter schools, tax credit programs for public and private schools, inter- and intra-district open enrollment, and an Empowerment Scholarship Program (Arizona Department of Education, 2015), 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.

## Conceptual Framework

### Structure, Culture, and Agency

To better understand education policies such as school choice "on the ground" (Dumas & Anderson, 2014) we need to start with people's activities and interactions in the everyday settings of school life and understand how these are shaped by the actions and events in other contexts. Market-based school choice policies can be viewed as the result of multi-directional, historically-situated processes that are shaped by the three domains of structure, culture, and agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). First, structural forces, or the rules, arrangements, and organizations at the macro levels (such as large-scale government systems) and micro levels (for example, small systems located inside schools or amongst community groups) are influential, but they are not the only sources of policy shaping. 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, in individual or collective groups, can reproduce or transform structures through an iterative process of understanding and acting on meaning and interpretation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) metaphorically describe the reflexive relationships between these three domains as "building the plane while it's flying" (p. 90). They (Datnow et al., 2002) explain these multi-directional interactions as the complex, continual co-construction of policies built in the process of practice. In other words, policies and practices are fluid.

Archer (1995) theorizes these distinct dimensions of change, describing how structure, culture, and agency undergo morphogenesis through the reciprocal influences, or interplay, within and between each domain. To more robustly understand school choice policies and practices (rather than prioritizing one area of influence and placing others in the background) these concepts help 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Arizona allows EMOs to be charter holders (Miron & Gulosino, 2013). The state of Arizona ranks second in the United States, behind Michigan, in the total number of for-profit EMOs (27 in total) that operate charter schools. There are also 31 non-profit EMOs operating in Arizona, which places them second, behind Texas and California (Miron & Gulosino, 2013).

Datnow et al. (2002) place priority on understanding power since all actors are not equal in their ability to create and engage with policies. For example, charter school organizations can 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 type of consumer-oriented exit as a withdrawal of voice.

Individuals and groups may also disrupt commonly held narratives about education structures and policies, offering and acting out counter-narratives about the effects of market-based choice policies in public education. Thus, policies are shaped by both structures and people with various perspectives and levels of power (Archer, 1995; Datnow et al., 2002). Overall, through rich, contextually-oriented, and multi-layered lenses of co-construction, critical ethnographers can document and analyze how and why individuals, groups, and communities interpret, struggle, and interact with market-based school choice policies, and how these processes are shaping and being shaped by the macro and micro level forces of structure, culture, and agency.

### **Position as a Researcher**

My position as a researcher in this study 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 was, at the time of the study, emotionally involved with navigating the complexities of Arizona's market-based public school system. My eldest child, my daughter, entered elementary school and my youngest son was nearly 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.

### **Method**

#### **The Community and School Context**

As explained in the introduction, there are few qualitative studies that consider the ways in which well-established school choice policies and programs affect stakeholders in local settings. This provided my rationale for conducting a qualitative design and, in particular, an ethnographic exploration of the community. I utilized ethnographic methods, which I describe in detail below, to focus on the participants and activities of members at Arizona's Southwest Learning Site school (hereafter SLS), which is a kindergarten through eighth grade district-run public school in the Desert Public School System (hereafter DPSS). To protect anonymity, people's and locations' names are always pseudonyms. The school's community includes parents with children attending SLS and stakeholders who continued to take part in school

activities even after their children aged out of the school. 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, SLS, is the Arizona Interfaith Group (AIG). AIG is 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) to foster change related to social justice. The AIG promotes traditional public schools and informs members of the community about the importance of supporting public schools, public spaces, and civic society more generally. Numerous community members, with guidance from AIG, organize and strategically build social and political relationships to influence legislators and other policymakers. They interact with neighbors, teachers' groups, and church affiliates in DPSS to teach them about Arizona's education reforms and, more specifically, about local EMOs and their administrators' political connections, privatization and the marketing of public services, the influence and activities of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC, 2013; Anderson & Donchik, 2014), and potential implications these issues have for democracy and justice.

Just as Arizona's open enrollment practices, in a sense, erase boundaries, the community where I studied has somewhat blurry boundaries. The social, cultural, political, and economic landscape of Arizona's public school system includes both intra- and inter-district open enrollment provisions wherein students and families are involved with schools and activities that often extend beyond their physical neighborhoods. This results in open flows as students move into and out of adjacent districts, and SLS's and competing charter schools' populations reflect this. These open flows provide a context for geographic boundaries to also be imagined as community members affiliate and link themselves through values, religion, and/or ethnicity.

For example, community affiliations may be formed in constructed spaces outside of fixed physical locations with clear geospatial boundaries. Therefore, if a person attended a public meeting, I considered them to potentially be a part of the community. Members included, for example, young adults from DPSS schools who represent themselves as activists at publicly held accountability meetings, retirees affiliated with local church groups who volunteer their time in various capacities in the community, teachers and school leaders, some of their own students and children, principals and vice-principals from SLS and elsewhere in DPSS, Spanish-speaking parents who take part in sessions using translation earpiece technology, and, in some cases, legislators from the district.

**The school and surrounding area.** SLS school serves approximately 500 students in kindergarten through eighth grade and is one of DPSS's 31 public schools (DPSS, 2015a).<sup>4</sup> In 2015, at the time of the study, every grade at SLS, except for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, had a waiting list. The district served approximately 25,670 students (DPSS, 2015c) and, as a potential result of open enrollment, all of its public middle schools and high schools had waitlists. Fourteen out of the 19 elementary schools had a waitlist in at least one grade (DPSS, 2015b). These waiting lists could be a signal of the district's popularity within Arizona's education market.

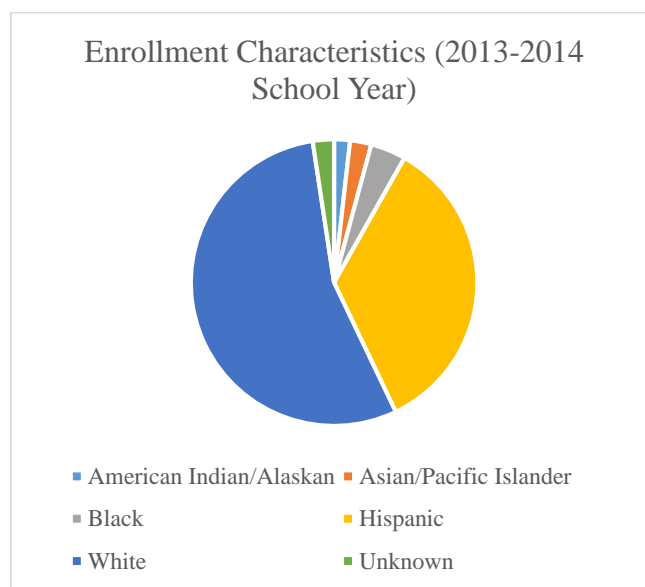
Interestingly, SLS is a "school of choice," though not a charter school, that is supported by its school district. The school was opened in 1990 as a "demonstrative project" (DPSS, 2015a) that charged its principal and teachers with being innovative and with going outside the boundaries of education in its traditional sense to put into practice modern educational research

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<sup>4</sup> To reiterate, DPSS is a pseudonym, used to protect confidentiality. I have also withheld identifiable information in the references section related to DPSS.



on effective schools and how children learn (DPSS, 2015a). Students were taught in multi-age classrooms across a sprawling campus in a high-income neighborhood. Despite its prestigious location, Arizona's open enrollment policies make possible a boundary-absent situation, whereupon students who live inside, adjacent to, or outside of the school's neighborhood can all attend. The school became a Title 1 school in 2012, and nearly half of the students (45%) received free or reduced price lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Figure 1 provides race/ethnicity demographic information from the 2013-2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).



*Note.* I left out the numbers in this chart to protect anonymity since the chart shows sufficient detail for its purpose. Source: CCD public school data for the 2013-2014 school year (U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

*Figure 1.* Southwest Learning Site (SLS) Enrollment Characteristics (2013-2014 School Year)

We might see this “school of choice” as one that closely reflects the original visions of charter schools as proposed by Ray Budde (1988), previous educational administration professor at the University of Massachusetts, and Albert Shanker (1988), one-time leader of the American Federation of Teachers (see also Ravitch, 2010, 2011). Budde (1988) and Shanker (1988) originally envisioned charter schools as alternative schools that could function alongside traditional public schools to experiment with methods for helping students who were potentially failing in traditional settings.

The city containing the school site is a popular relocation site for retirees, which may be a significant factor in elections when attempting to approve school district bonds. Voters rejected DPSS's two recent school bond overrides. The area's residents have an above average median annual household income in comparison to other areas within the metropolis. There are many churches representing different religions and denominations in the community, including some that I visited to take part in meetings and organizing sessions with community members. Numerous churches are dotted around the base of a beautiful desert mountain.

Wealth, prestige, and various forms of capital are apparent in the city and school district containing SLS, but it is necessary to closely consider the areas and schools located outside of the neighborhoods containing relatively high household income levels. For example, the southern part of the city's public school district has a lower median annual income, as do the areas around SLS to the south, east, and west. In informal discussions, community members

have commented that the city seems to be divided, with 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 upcoming bond override opportunity. This override would specifically re-enact local tax funds that were dwindling because of the two previously failed bills. As I walked and talked alongside 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 can take money directly “from their back pockets” and put the money into their children’s schools. She felt that this action lacked regard 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.

**Closely located high-profile charter schools.** Two EMOs oversee Strong Establishment and Masters Group charter schools, both of which have a strong presence in and around DPSS. The schools are 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 lists (see Glass, 2014; Welner, 2015). Before meeting anyone in the community, I conducted research (Potterton, 2013) on these high-profile charter schools. I gathered publicly available demographic and statistical information about the organizations’ Arizona schools, which also included some that are of interest in the community where I was studying. Then, after reading the article, Sarah, a parent at SLS, contacted me by email to share her concerns about how Strong Establishment and Masters Group charter schools did not serve any students who received free or reduced fee lunch, served very few students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and as a whole served just one student who was identified as an English language learner. The charter schools served between 58% and 86% White students. The school at the lower end (58%) was an outlier, with the others serving higher percentages of White students.

There are competing high-profile charter schools that sit inside or adjacent to neighborhoods with above average median household income levels. This suggests that Strong Establishment and Masters Group schools’ geographical locations were shaped by market considerations. As will be seen, one particular Masters Group school site was a controversial subject amongst some stakeholders about competition between schools in the district.

## Qualitative Techniques

Using ethnographic methods, I maintained prolonged, iterative engagement with SLS stakeholders and the school’s surrounding community for approximately six months of initial data collection. I collected data through naturalistic immersion, participant observation, and three semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled active members in the school and community to gain an initial understanding of their interests and experiences. My justification for the small sample size of three interviewees is that this study was a pilot to get to know the school community and families with whom I was first interacting. I met with three members of the school and AIG institution- and community-organizing group (one being Sarah) upon Sarah’s invitation, and we talked about the study’s findings (Potterton, 2013) that led her to contact me, their own experiences with the same high-profile 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 foundation of the study. Activities included, but were not limited to, AIG meetings, parent gatherings at homes, and school events. I informally observed public meetings for approximately 13 weeks to learn about the group and to develop relationships. I then received

participant approval and research permission through Internal Review Board (IRB) procedures at the university to explore research questions through the collection of data.

I documented descriptions of stakeholders, and the setting at the school and within the larger community, through fieldnotes, jottings, and informal analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). I audio-recorded, transcribed “verbatim” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126), and analyzed the three interviews, which, in total, provided approximately four hours of data. The Appendix contains the questions that guided our semi-structured interview sessions.

As described, I attended AIG meetings, as well as any other gatherings or organizing meets to which I was invited and able. During the time frame of the IRB-approved study, I attended over 20 meetings of various sizes, which included formal meetings, informal gatherings including at parents’ homes, and one-to-one interactions (a total of approximately 35 meetings including the time frame prior to formally conducting research). Group meetings lasted anywhere from two hours to six hours and were typically attended by, on average, between 10 and 60 people. For example, when some stakeholders canvassed neighborhoods in the school district to educate voters about the upcoming override funding vote for the public schools, I attended and actively participated in canvassing efforts with my partner and children.

### **Data Analysis and Rigor**

Qualitative data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, through a reflective process of reading and re-reading fieldnotes and analytic memos, through multiple cycles of coding, and through the examination of recurrent themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Fetterman, 2010; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I also reviewed the 70 documents I collected at meetings. Documents included AIG meeting agendas with their associated supporting materials and AIG pamphlets. When analyzing the interview transcripts, I first read through them without any pre-determined codes (although I do not assume that researchers can ever be necessarily theory-free). My analytic memos played a complementary and reflexive role in tracking the development of codes and ideas and further provides credibility to the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As my codes developed during readings and re-readings of data, I created descriptions in detail, describing what I saw, and some of these descriptions can be seen in this paper. As Creswell and Poth (2018) state, “Description becomes a good place to start in a qualitative study (after reading and managing data), and it plays a central role in ethnographic and case studies” (p. 189).

I attempted to avoid over-coding when reviewing the data by applying lean coding strategies that prompted me to only introduce new codes when necessary (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014). This is because codes may expand as analysis continues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Even still, I found that had created more first-cycle codes than I likely needed or that could be useful without being redundant. Yet, 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 re-address and focus my coding at a later point to avoid the risk of leaving out potentially useful analyses. Therefore, in later cycles 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. I applied similar strategies across the fieldnotes data and document data, as well, although for the fieldnotes and document data, I relied heavily on highlighting and hand-writing notes in margins.

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 more (for example, from multiple sources about the history of the school and changes that occurred). My interviews were also guided by the semi-structured interview template. I

further 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).

My analysis is grounded in careful observances of experiences in the "small" (Besley, 2007; Gulson & Lubienski, 2014) and an exploration of how these are shaped by dominant mega-narratives (Olson & Craig, 2009) related to school choice. These mega-narratives, often reflected in policy debates, are big stories about society containing broad ideas related to freedom and increased opportunities for students. Yet focusing on grand stories can easily obscure "small," local experiences and interactions with policies. By fluidly viewing the "small" with a "big" lens per Maxine Greene's (1995) explanation of a research lens, I am committed 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). Through member checking and rigorously examining my findings through conversations with members of the community and with research advisors, I worked hard to ensure that the community and interview participants' local stories were told in the "small" and viewed through this "big" lens (Greene, 1995).

## **Results**

### **Overview of Experiences, Perceptions, Socio-Political Conflicts, and Cultural Tensions**

This results section is organized to describe three main research themes. First, when analyzing AIG's work meetings, documents, and my interviews, it became clear that the method of "agitating" was central to the AIG organization's mission to train and empower leaders. I illustrate this below. Second, despite differences in how parents talked about and made decisions related to their children's schoolings, there was a common ethical commitment to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity, and they navigated the school choice environment with emotion and love. Third, this shared ethical commitment did not erase conflicts and tensions that existed within the community. It became clear that some parents "walked the line" between what was best for their family versus what they felt was best for public schools.

### **Agitating**

In an informal discussion with Josh, the leader of AIG, I asked him how he planned and organized 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 for Arizona "ought" to be. The attendees split into the three, conceptually-themed reading groups, and all of the topics provided as prompts (which focused on ideas and concepts of "abundance versus scarcity," "economy failings and markets," and "privatization" related to both charter schools and prisons) 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 I collected and analyzed — that is, that 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," 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 were important for the organization. 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 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 critically shared (“agitated”) listeners by noting 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 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 example, in our interview, Sarah, the mother with children at SLS who is also an active member of AIG, discussed some of these contradictions and social and cultural conflicts. She said,

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.

Sarah continued to share that SLS had been presented with what some might consider a “problem” in the community 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 referred to the culture of the school as the “tenor” and said that the school also brought in 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 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 to 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 charter school opened close to SLS and other highly respected local district public schools:

Well, I'll tell you what I thought was really interesting about [*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*] "Ahhhhhhh!" 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.

Although the excerpts above are from an interview with one parent, they reflect numerous conversations that I had with other parents. Many grappled at times with SLS's new Title 1 status, lowered test scores, and the district's failed override attempts, yet 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. Further, AIG provided tools for organizing, and parents' deep levels of care and emotion for their children's schooling prompted stakeholders 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, 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 actions for the support of the district public school bond override vote even though, if the bond override passed, charter schools could not, by law, receive bond funds. She also continued to speak admirably of SLS, and she is knowledgeable and vocal about Arizona's structural education budget issues as well as problems associated with turning public spaces over to private investment groups.

According to Lynn, DPSS enabled competition between its own district public schools. She shared that she was "livid" when she was repeatedly sent information from DPSS about a gifted program offered at a different district school. She said,

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 Cactus 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 its own district public schools. The structure and culture of DPSS had become, to her, a place where, even within a public system, competition mattered over collaboration so much so that its own schools should compete for students. The flyers she received in the mail were, to her, evidence of this. Lynn was also deeply concerned about how district policies were increasingly aimed at selling unused school space to private investors. And so, amidst her care, commitment, and love for SLS, and alongside her internal and sometimes external conflicts with the existing structure and culture of DPSS and school, she acted upon her interpretations and explored other options available for her children. Ultimately, Lynn settled happily, though not without some reservations, and she chose the "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 some of the cultural aspects of the environment, including the charter school organization's promotion of the state's public school tax credit donation program (from which Arizona's charter schools can benefit by law) 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 [*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 encourages individuals to also pursue matching corporate gifts from employers on top of the tax credit program and the suggested individual family donations per child. The program is publicly explained as a means for families to make up the difference between public funding and the essential priorities of the organization's educational model,

which, according to the organization, costs more per-student than what the organization receives from public funding.

### Discussion

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. I found that, even where these contradictions were evident in this community, many parents nevertheless showed conscious efforts to challenge competitive tendencies in the education market. Also, the donations that Lynn described are encouraged by the EMO central administration since these programs are a part of all of the organization's schools. Such practices blur the public/private school line (Ball, 2007, 2009; Burch, 2009; Lubienski, 2009). As has been documented in other research (Potterton, 2013; Schneider, 2013), some EMO board members have powerful political influence in, and they engage with potential conflicts-of-interests for, advocating and creating policies and practices that financially benefit the organization and advance free-market principles for education more generally. There is a structural link, then, between the donation program and Arizona's policymaking sphere of influence.

Lynn and her family, whilst maintaining heartfelt support for SLS and the public school district as a whole, considered the pros and cons of schools within the family's choice set 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,<sup>5</sup> their children's education in Arizona's education market. Interestingly, Lynn and Sarah were both similarly aware of the ways in which the public district and charter schools were competing with one another, and they both reasoned through their choices carefully and with commitment. Yet, with Lynn's staunch support of public education, and her critical view toward the charter school's financial and marketing practices, she recognized tension and walked the blurred public/private school line (see Ball, 2007, 2009; Burch, 2009; Lubienski, 2009). At the same time, AIG members agitated others to critically think about issues including privatization in public education and civic responsibility in public spheres. Sarah, Lynn, and Josh all took part in AIG's work with passion and commitment, and still their individual experiences and perceptions of school choice policies and practices in Arizona, perhaps unsurprisingly, varied considerably.

The community I studied is unique because it is comprised of individuals organizing around a public school that is largely, though not entirely, middle-class. Many are knowledgeable about local, state, and national education policies. Whereas SLS stakeholders had recently experienced an increased entrance of low-income families, had been recently titled as a Title 1 school, and saw a decline in their performance ranking and test scores, two high-profile and "high-performing" charter school organizations meanwhile opened locations near the school. Strong Establishment and Masters Group charter schools, known for their nationally competitive high academic rankings, are both situated close to the school and surrounding community. Further, DPSS's two recent school bond overrides were rejected by voters for the first time, suggesting declining support amongst voters for public schools. As a result, the school (SLS) provided a rich setting for an analysis of school choice reforms as they are interpreted and acted out in a community that, in many cases, also has generous levels of social, cultural, political, and economic capital. I acknowledge how these forms of capital might create and reproduce advantages (Ball, 1993, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2000) and, also, how

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<sup>5</sup> See Garcia's (2010) evidence and discussion about parents who choose by staying at their Arizona public district schools.



families might use their capital to build and promote counter-narratives that challenge aspects of school choice policies (Harvey, 2005).

The community has experienced significant school changes in the midst of expanding school choice reforms, and future studies in different local contexts will help to further develop our understanding about effects of policies and practices “on the ground.” Thick, qualitative descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the social, cultural, political, and economic structures and actors/agents in this community begin to highlight what a long-standing, deeply entrenched market-based school system looks like from the perspectives of a range of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, interested community members, and policymakers. Relatively few scholars have conducted studies related to Arizona’s charter schools, and no research has provided an in-depth qualitative description of Arizona’s education market “on the ground” (Dumas & Anderson, 2014). 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 examining how “small” stories are shaped by, and how they might possibly disrupt, mega-narratives and fluid imaginings of schools, choice, 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) by understanding the ways in which families, young people, and communities might influence policy from the “ground up.”

Throughout this study, it is apparent that, amongst the groups of families and community and institution members who have different reasons for taking part, and who have had different experiences in Arizona’s education system, a common link is their shared ethical commitment to, and care for, justice, democracy, well-being, and diversity. The AIG organization stands alongside the community group at SLS, (and the larger community), to help empower people to be agents for interpreting, critically reflecting upon, and then attempting to shape and shift policies by engaging with legislators and politicians through the production of a counter-narrative. The findings from this study help us to 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 also provides a potential conceptual contribution by beginning to identify and map the contradictions, problems, and tensions associated with the ways in which parents and community members respond to the expansion of policies through their interwoven experiences with structures, cultures, and agency, especially as these policies are applied through increasing variations of school choice reforms. Based on my findings, the policies and programs impacted the local community by challenging social and cultural positions, and this has great implications for future research and consideration in not only SLS’ school setting but in the surrounding area, as well. Other school systems can benefit by being aware of these changes as policies grow within their own systems.

Finally, I maintain that there is space for some data evidence to be considered via naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). Of course, there are limitations in all studies, and this study contained a particularly small interview sample size and a unique set of long-standing school choice policies and program. To appropriately consider this research in other settings, the local conditions, including social, cultural, and political contexts, are extremely important and, indeed, are likely paramount to relevant data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. That said, 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's (1982) 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.

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## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Expected time for interview: 1 to 1.5 hours

#### Introduction

(post-consent form)

“Thank you 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 we will explore. Your responses will be confidential at all times throughout the 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 do your children currently attend school?”

(If appropriate) “How did you come to choose SLS as the school for your child?”

“Why?”

“How long has (have) your child (children) been at SLS?” [Has your child attended any other schools?]

“Do you have any children at any other schools and, if so, why did you choose those schools?”

“How would you describe the ways SLS has changed, or not, over time?”

#### Background Questions About the Groups

“When and how did you become involved with [(*parent group*) and/or AIG]?”

(If involved with both): “Did you start working with one group first and how did you become involved with the second?”

“How would you describe your role with [(*parent group*) and/or AIG]?”

“How much time do you spend per week on (*parent group*) and/or AIG activities?” [What kind of activities do you participate in?]

“Can you please tell me about how long the group has been meeting?”

“How was the group organized?”

“In your understanding, what are the groups’ main goals and purposes for meeting?”

“What, in your opinion, are the *most pressing* goals and purposes of the groups?”

“Do you participate in any other activities related to your child’s school [children’s schools]? Have you attended any other types of school-related meetings?”

#### More In-Depth School Choice Questions

“Did you consider sending your child to any other schools?”

“What were those schools like?”

“Why did you choose SLS 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 SLS?” (If so): “Which ones?”



“How far are these schools from SLS?”

“Do you know if any of these are charter schools?”

### School Choice Questions

“Can you please share what you know, generally, about charter schools?” (Prompt to define any key terms if they are mentioned by interviewee... examples include but are not limited to: “privatization,” “markets,” “neoliberal,” “conservative.” Also ask, then, where they learned about any of these concepts.)

“Can you please share what you know, more specifically, about other neighborhood schools in your area? Which can you name?”

(If appropriate): “What do you know about, and what are your thoughts about:

- a) “(*local*)” Elementary?”
- b) “(*local*)” Elementary?”
- c) “(*local*)” Middle?”
- d) “(*high-profile charter school*)?”
- e) “(*area charter school*)?”

“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 school or your experiences with (*parent group*) and/or AIG that I haven’t asked?”

“Do you have any questions for me?”

### Author Note

Amanda U. Potterton is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. Her research and teaching interests include the politics of school choice, charter schools, privatization and public education, and the justice-related implications of these policies for students living in poverty, for students with special education needs, and for students who are English language learners. Amanda’s current research agenda focuses on how public school stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, school leaders, and other community members, interpret and experience school choice policies and practices in local settings. Prior to pursuing her Ph.D., she was a New York City Teaching Fellow and taught special education in New York City, and she was a teacher and school leader in the United Kingdom. Amanda holds a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Evaluation from the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [amanda.potterton@uky.edu](mailto:amanda.potterton@uky.edu).

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