

4-1-2012

# Minority Status and School Choice: The Experiences of Native--Born African American and West Indian Immigrants in Hartford

Nathan Walsh

*Trinity College*, [nathan.walsh@trincoll.edu](mailto:nathan.walsh@trincoll.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Walsh, Nathan, "Minority Status and School Choice: The Experiences of Native--Born African American and West Indian Immigrants in Hartford". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2012.

Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/247>

Minority Status and School Choice:  
The Experiences of Native-Born African American and  
West Indian Immigrants in Hartford

Nathan Walsh

May 4, 2012

Senior Thesis

Educational Studies Program, Trinity College (CT)

Faculty Advisor: Jack Dougherty

Abstract:

*This qualitative study is designed to apply educational anthropologist John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance to school choice by examining choice differences between two racially similar but ethnically different minority groups in the Hartford region. Parents in Hartford, Connecticut, have several different public school choice options available to them, including intra-district choice, regional magnet schools, and a suburban district transfer program known as Open Choice. For all of these options, school choice is designed to improve opportunities for Hartford students. Drawing on data from five interviews with West Indian immigrant parents and three interviews with native-born African American parents, this study suggests that while Ogbu's theory might sufficiently be able to explain differences regarding parental orientation to school choice and proximity, it indicates that the theory does not effectively explain ethnic differences in parental orientation to education in general or orientation to the local urban school system for African American and West Indian parents in Hartford. Additionally, given the exponential expansion of school choice policies within the last decade it is becoming increasingly important to question both the role of ethnicity in school choice and, more broadly, the effectiveness of school choice policies in low-income minority communities nationally.*

## Table of Contents

---

Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	6
Methods .....	25
Discussion .....	26
Conclusion .....	38
Limitations & Future Research .....	40

## Introduction

---

The central research question framing this study is: Does anthropologist John Ogbu's theory on immigrant versus involuntary minorities explain any differences in parental views on school choice application processes? This explores the role of minority status on patterns of school choice among Hartford Parents. This research uses Hartford as a case study to better understand the relationship between minority status and school choice preferences of native-born African American and West Indian immigrant populations. Special attention is given to the differences that emerge between these two ethnicities because any significant difference might have significant implications on choice patterns.

Nationally, about 12.6% of the population identifies as black or African American. Less than 10% of the black population in America and less than 1% of all the total population identify as West Indian. Although with a larger proportion of minority residents, the story is similar in Hartford. With a population of just 123,945 only 46,264 residents identify as black or African American alone while only about 10,082 identify as West Indian (US Census, 2000). Given that they represent only a very small subgroup of the population in both examples, dedicated research on West Indians or any small immigrant population might appear inconsequential. However, research examining the differences among racial subgroups is extremely important. It addresses the longstanding debate regarding whether race or culture and ethnicity is/are the most important factor(s) in socioeconomic success. The concept of the model minority, or a group that is perceived to academically and socially outperform other minority groups, relies on the concept that

certain immigrant groups innately possesses favorable characteristics. It is important to challenge this casual assumption to improve educational opportunities for low-income minority populations

*- Hartford & Its Schools -*

The effects of racial isolation, concentrated poverty and urban decay have despoiled Hartford, Connecticut, for decades. Once one of the wealthiest cities in the country, Hartford's impoverished residents are now left with a crumbling infrastructure, failing schools, and little promise of upward mobility. Hartford became one of America's poorest cities after large residential and economic changes spurred by rapid suburbanization radically altered the city's demographic landscape. In 2009 the median household income was just 29,190 dollars leaving nearly one-third of families living below the federal poverty line. Almost half of city residents identify as Latino and nearly one third identify as African-American (US Census, 2009). Additionally, there is a large and very diverse immigrant population. Within the district, 43.3 percent of students come from households where English is not the primary language and astoundingly there are at least 70 unique languages (Strategic School Profile, 2010). In a cruel socioeconomic joke, Hartford is surrounded by some of the nation's wealthiest towns. Idyllic suburban neighborhoods with safe, high-scoring and overwhelmingly white public schools are just a few short miles away from some of Hartford's poorest neighborhoods where poverty and violence seem immutably entrenched.

In 1995, only 4% of students in Hartford passed the reading, writing, and mathematics sections of the Connecticut Mastery Tests, a standardized test for public school students. By the close of the century, fewer than half of students were graduating from high school and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges even recommended revoking Hartford Public High School's accreditation. It seemed that no reform strategy or bureaucratic change would cause significant changes for the troubled district - even a state takeover of the school system in 1997 yielded lackluster results at best. Schools were lacking even the most basic supplies and Hartford was plagued by mismanagement at both the district administrative and city governmental levels (Burns, 2002). At one point, the dysfunctional school system resorted to hiring a private company to assume governance of the district. Hartford became infamous for the nation's largest suburban-urban achievement gap. And, "because patronage politics, poor test scores, management problems, and division within the polarized school system continued, parents and African American and Latino leaders declared that the educational system was in a state of emergency" (Burns, pg. 64). While it was clear that the school system needed to change, it was unclear at the time how to affect positive change in the long embroiled district.

*- School Choice in Hartford -*

Parents in Hartford are confronted with a wide variety of public tuition-free options. Since 2008, the number of public school options has dramatically increased. Today, parents can choose not only from an intra-district portfolio of schools within Hartford but also

regional magnet schools and suburban schools. The first option, intra-district choice, was introduced as part of an aggressive reform strategy begun in 2006 under then-Superintendent Steven Adamowski. Designed to reinvigorate and modernize a tired and ineffective school system, the reform strategy replaced a longstanding practice of locally zoned neighborhood schools with choice. Put simply, students are no longer assigned to a school. Instead parents are free to choose the best schools. In fact, if a student is entering the system for the first time or is currently enrolled in the terminal grade at their current school, parents are required to choose. This capitalizes on the idea that advocates of school choice promote: enabling parent choice will expose bureaucratic and disconnected public schools to market pressures and create a positive momentum for change. Because students are no longer assigned to a school based simply geography, parents can vote with their feet and enroll their children in the best schools. In Hartford, intra-district school choice is designed to improve the district's poor academic performance by using recognized best practices.

The second option, regional magnet schools, is largely due the *Sheff vs. O'Neill* lawsuit. Originally filed in 1989, *Sheff vs. O'Neill* is a landmark court case that asserts that Hartford students attend largely failing and inadequate schools because of the severe *de facto* segregation that pervades the region. After nearly two decades of seemingly endless appeals and challenges, the state and plaintiffs agreed on a new settlement in 2008. It stipulated that at least 80% of Hartford parents seeking reduced isolation schools for their children must be accommodated. To accomplish this the agreement relies on an expanded system of regional magnet schools operated by a variety of school districts throughout the capital region. It also incorporates the third option for parents, a program called Open

Choice. Originally conceived in the 1960s as Project Concern, Open Choice allows Hartford students to attend suburban schools and, conversely, suburban students to attend Hartford schools that are not part of the regional magnet system on a space available basis. For suburban districts, participation in the Open Choice program is voluntary and not all neighboring towns accept students from Hartford.

All together, parents are overwhelmed with choice. For example, a student living in the Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood has over 30 options for 9<sup>th</sup> grade – and that's even excluding the suburban schools available through Open Choice.<sup>1</sup> For all of these options, if there are too many applications than places available admission is awarded through a lottery. Because the highest performing schools often receive significant numbers of applications, the admissions process for public schools becomes a lottery in which only relatively few students “win.” The admission rates at a handful of select magnet schools in the Hartford region alarmingly rival rates admission rates at Ivy League schools because demand wildly outstrips supply.

---

<sup>1</sup> Determined using *Smart Choice*, an online choice tool for Hartford region parents. <<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/>>



## Literature Review

---

The expansion of school choice is based on the flawed assumption that all parents can choose equally. Both parents' values regarding education and ability to choose vary significantly according to socioeconomic and ethnic lines. It is critical then that researchers better understand the complicated relationship between minority groups and mainstream society. This research is designed to study the differences between US-born African Americans and West Indian immigrants. Although racially similar, the two groups have different ethnic identities. This research is designed to address the question: Does anthropologist John Ogbu's theory on immigrant versus involuntary minorities explain any differences in parental views on school choice application processes? Using African-Americans and Afro-Caribbean as a case study, this question can be rephrased more generally to ask: Does school choice differ among ethnically different, but racially similar minorities?

### *- Part I: Ogbu's Theory -*

In his cultural-ecological theory of school performance, anthropologist John Ogbu explains variations in minority school performance through his typology of minority status. Ogbu classifies minorities into one of two dichotomous categories: voluntary (immigrant) minorities, and involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities. For the purposes of his study, Ogbu generally omitted groups like refugee populations that do not cleanly fit in either category.

According to Ogbu, minority status is the category that defines the relationship between minority groups and dominant society. Voluntary minorities are immigrants who have more or less willingly arrived in the United States in search of better opportunities.

Voluntary minorities generally encounter discriminatory practices upon arrival, given the inequitable structure of mainstream society. However, they do not experience long-lasting academic consequences as a result because voluntary minorities do not rationalize their presence in America as forced upon them by white oppressors. Under Ogbu's typology, West Indian immigrants would be considered voluntary minorities.

Ogbu's second category, involuntary (immigrant) minorities, is comprised of people who were unwillingly included in American society through slavery, conquest, or colonization. Involuntary minorities rationalize their presence in the United States differently than voluntary minorities. Because they arrived against their will, involuntary minorities rationalize their presence in America as forced upon them by whites. Additionally, because they conceptualize their presence negatively, involuntary minorities are generally less successful economically and academically. American-born blacks are considered involuntary minorities.

Much of the difference between involuntary and immigrant minorities is derived from their respective frames of reference. Voluntary minorities have a positive dual frame of reference. Because they came to the United States for better opportunities, voluntary minorities are willing to "accommodate and accept less than equal treatment" to succeed (Ogbu, p. 170). Immigrant minorities contextualize discriminatory treatment in the United States in reference to the limited social or economic opportunity in their home countries. Although again confronted by racial or ethnic discrimination, success is nonetheless more

tangible in the United States. Involuntary minorities have a negative dual sense of reference. Because they did not immigrate willingly, involuntary minorities can only compare their socioeconomic status to that of white middle class Americans. Due to this negative dual frame of reference, nonimmigrant minorities do not view America as a land of opportunity. Rather, they believe that racial discrimination and their socioeconomic suppression is permanent and insurmountable (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998).

Ogbu's groundbreaking typology continues to generate considerable amounts of scholarly research because his theories have significant impact on educational performance of minorities nationwide. In her 1997 research, Gibson discusses the shortcomings of Ogbu's theories. Gibson recognizes that the development of better, more effective schools necessitates a "fuller understand of the relationships that exist between youth identities, the structure of power relations within school settings, and students' academic engagement" (p. 447). Put simply, she critiques Ogbu's theory because it is overly categorical and cannot reflect complex dynamics among minority populations. Furthermore, Ogbu does not sufficiently account for the role of gender in cultural experiences and educational achievement. Gender and generational expectations are discussed specifically later in this study on page 22.

In his study analyzing the applicability of Ogbu's theory among minority francophone, aboriginal, and Afro-Caribbean students in Canadian public schools, Cummings concludes that to some extent, the involuntary/immigrant minority typology is true in the most basic sense (1997). However, Cummings states that the reality of intricate hegemonic relationships is "far too complex to stuff inside a simple dichotomy" (p. 423). Ogbu's typology was not constructed from a holistic understanding of power relations. It

ignores other forms of intergroup power relations such as sexism or language discrimination that can critically shape socioeconomic status. Cummings also notes that while there is the rhetoric of multicultural education within the Canadian system, systemic racism is exposed through curriculum materials and teacher expectations that significantly affect African-Canadian students. Given the complex nature of immigration, asking if African-Canadians “constitute an involuntary or a voluntary minority group, is not the central issue” (Cummings, p. 426). African-Canadians negotiate their diverse identities in a fluid society. As a result, Cummings argues, characteristics of both involuntary and immigrant minorities are evident in the “dynamic interplay” between African-Canadian communities and dominant white society (p. 426). Ultimately, Cummings stresses that future research should focus more strongly on the relationships between empowered and repressed groups instead of trying to create generalized categories. My research is designed to address, to some extent, how relationships with individual schools and the system more generally affect school choice. The comparison between two ethnically different but racially similar minorities will enable comparison to Ogbu’s typology.

In *Black Identities: West Indian Dreams and American Realities* Mary Waters discusses the creation of the Afro-Caribbean ethnic identity in urban New York City. Ogbu argues that the psychological orientation that minorities develop is a result of their respective minority status. Although Waters partially agrees with Ogbu’s typology, she argues that the psychological orientation of West Indian immigrants is a conscious choice. While Waters and Ogbu discuss different reasons for the development of positive dual frames of reference of West Indian immigrants, they discuss generally similar consequences. West Indian immigrants are pressured to develop a transnational identity

because “America is a fundamentally racist society” (Waters, p. 42). In the Caribbean money can “whiten” blacks. However, in the United States white culture is exclusionary towards blacks because of historical patterns of slavery and discrimination. Upon arrival in the United States and confronted with the realities of African American socioeconomic oppression Afro-Caribbean immigrants must develop an identity that distinguishes them as ethnically separate from US-born African Americans to provide better opportunities for success academically, socially, and economically.

Some researchers of parental roles in school choice indirectly criticize Ogbu because their focus lies in school success factors, like parent involvement, that are completely unaddressed by Ogbu’s theory. Significant scholarly research clearly identifies parent involvement as an important component of student success. Because school choice is frequently a labor-intensive process, many families refer to it as a “full time job,” only parents with sufficient time and resources can fully participate (Perez). Through their ethnographic study with 390 students and 59 mothers, Weiss et al. argue, “full time maternal work and schooling may impose barriers to family educational involvement” (p. 895). This is compounded by the fact that considerable research shows that women often maintain the “primary responsibility for negotiating the demands of work and family” and that impoverished urban areas have higher rates of single-mother headed households (Weiss et al., p. 880).

Yet another critique directly challenges a fundamental principal behind Ogbu’s theory. In their study based on survey data collected in the from 1,188 African-American and Latino parents, Chavkin and Williams discuss that the common stereotype of minority parents’ disinterest with their children’s education is, in fact, incorrect. Put simply, Chavkin

and Williams argue that Ogbu's suggestion that involuntary minority parents do not willingly participate in education is based on a stereotypical representation of these parents and not representative of their realistic orientation to education. In many respects the authors found that African-American parents are very active and motivated in their children's education. However, they concede that not all minority groups are alike because "cultural differences among minority groups may also contribute to differences in the ways parents relate to the school" (Chavkin & Williams, pg. 118). African Americans, who according to Ogbu have a negative dual frame of reference, were found to clearly participate in their children's education by these researchers.

Ogbu does not sufficiently address linguistic variations among minority populations. When examining two autobiographical sketches it becomes clear that language differences, even among English dialects, is critical in developing a better representation of minority orientation towards mainstream cultural institutions including public schools. For many minority groups language problems represent significant obstacles towards success. This is of particular concern within Latino immigrant communities but not necessarily for black minorities because many scholarly researchers assert that this is not the case for US-born African-Americans or black immigrants from several Caribbean nations where English dialects are spoken. Notwithstanding, many English dialect minority groups experience socioeconomic difficulties because their linguistic variation draws further emphasis to their minority identity. In his short autobiographical sketch, Ernie Smith discusses the role of "Ebonics," or Black English, in his life. Although technically English, his use of Ebonics labeled him "a verbal cripple" and left him in remedial courses throughout high school. Unaccepted by dominant white middle class society, Ebonics is a form of language that can

significantly limit the social and educational advancement of urban African-Americans.

Similarly, Joanne Kilgour Dowdy discussed the dichotomy between Trinidadian and formal British English in her essay "Ovuh Dyuh." Formal English represents the language of the economic and political elite while Trinidadian represents the language of her culture and ethnicity. Afro-Caribbean immigrants in America, although technically English speaking, often bring with them accents or dialects that dominant culture regards as inferior. Although neither Dowdy nor Smith critique Ogbu's work directly, their experiences lend criticism to the strict dichotomy of minority status he created because Ogbu's typology does not effectively address language. Although this research is not designed to research the impact of language directly, it does try to contextualize school choice more holistically because it is not based on a rigid dichotomy. Furthermore, as a qualitative study, this research is more focused on the linguistic choices parents make while explaining their general views on public schooling and school choice.

Ogbu's cultural-ecological typology, and the debates surrounding its validity, is important to school choice because a minority's rationalization of American hierarchal structures significantly impacts schooling preferences. Additionally, while there is little disagreement among scholars that socioeconomic and ethnic identity strongly affect patterns of school choice there is disagreement regarding how and why these differences manifest themselves. Schooling preferences cannot be defined in simple terms because they are reflective of historical, social, and emotional processes and consequently defy inelastic classification.

“Why do black immigrants do so much better than blacks who are born in America?” – *The Economist*, May 11, 1996, (pg. 57)

This type of casual discussion regarding the so-called advantage West Indian immigrants wield over native-born African Americans is regrettably common. Articles similar to the one found in above issue of *The Economist* have appeared in other widely circulated publications, including *The Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*. All of these articles represent the same danger: they analyze complex intra-racial differences without a scholarly perspective. Locally in Hartford, the median household income for residents who identify as West Indian was 38,646 dollars in 1999. The median income for Black or African-American households during the same year was just 29,423 (US Census, 1999). In the city of Hartford at least, this would suggest that race is secondary to other characteristics such as ethnicity in regards to economic success. However, it is dangerous to reduce the complex dynamics of racial and ethnic differences to the most basic indicators of dissimilarity. An effective understanding of ethnic differences requires the combined analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. Drawing a conclusion only from decontextualized statistical data like household income is insufficient. Even so, because there might actually be some truth in the West Indian advantage a discussion of its theoretical causes is necessary. There are three major explanations for the so-called advantage that West Indian immigrants have over native-born African Americans. The first is positive selectivity, the second is cultural superiority, and the third is acceptance by mainstream white culture. Although individually presented in previous research, the successful combination of these three explanations into one multi-faced explanation is seen in Suzanne Model’s 2008 publication.



According to the theory of positive selectivity, West Indian immigrants have demographic characteristics that give them an economic advantage over African Americans. It is widely recognized among educational and sociological scholars that voluntary migrants to the United States often have favorable characteristics. Although certainly not universal, those who choose to migrate often have higher than average levels of education. Certain immigration laws further this trend because immigrants with these favorable characteristics have historically been given preference. While West Indians in general are not necessarily higher educated or more driven than African Americans, West Indians in America often are because they actively chose to migrate (Model, 2008). Scholars do not universally accept positive selectivity. While some research has suggested that West Indians are more likely to have a college degree, other research has found minor differences in education. In his research, F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo discusses that while the majority of African immigrants have college degrees, only 13.1% of African Americans and 14.6% of Caribbean immigrants have college degrees (pg. 534). Dodoo's research suggests that while African immigrants might benefit from positive selectivity the same cannot necessarily be concluded for West Indian immigrants. This finding might invalidate an advantage for West Indians.

A second explanation of the West Indian advantage is based on the idea of cultural superiority. This theory contends that successful minority subgroups such as West Indian immigrants have superior cultural attributes. Many scholars suggest that the all-black society present in the West Indies creates a different psychological understanding of race between Caribbean immigrants and African Americans. Put simply, because blacks are the majority in the Caribbean, they are not subjected to the same racial persecution that native-

born blacks in America experience. Racial freedom in the Caribbean enables greater economic freedom for blacks. This corresponds to a “perseverance and ambition, immigrants from the West Indies forcefully demand equal treatment” instead of accepting a secondary position both economically and socially (Model, 2008, pg. 54).

The third explanation for the West Indian advantage is their acceptance by dominant culture. This hypothesis contends that West Indians receive “white favoritism” while native-born African Americans do not. Most significantly, this theory is different from the explanations of positive selectivity and cultural superiority because it is “other-directed rather than being inner-directed” (Model, 2008, pg. 64). The interplay between these three explanations yields significant disagreement among scholars regarding the accuracy or cause of the Caribbean immigrant economic advantage.

In many respects, it is understandable that American popular opinion ascribes to the belief that West Indians have an economic advantage over other blacks. After all, this conclusion relatively well supported with data and hard data is difficult to challenge. However, this conclusion is shortsighted because it does not appropriately weigh much of the data. Perhaps most importantly, it serves to deemphasize the issue of race in American culture because the idea of black immigrant success discredits legitimate charges of structural racism (Pierre, 2004). Any perceived economic or social differences among black ethnicities have significant implications on public policies nationwide.

Some scholars discredit the notion of the so-called cultural advantage of West Indians and report that any advantage is due to differing levels of acceptance into mainstream society and not the direct result of any specific cultural attributes. In his 1997 study of assimilation differences among black Americans, F. Nii-Amoo Doodoo discusses the

myth of the model minority. Through his comparison of native-born African Americans, Caribbean immigrants, and African immigrants, Dodoo found that black immigrants only have a small economic advantage over native-born blacks. Caribbean immigrants maintain an 8% income premium over African Americans even when certain favorable attributes are controlled for. However, Dodoo discusses that African immigrants do not have an advantage over native-born blacks. This finding also complicates the theory that black immigrants are more successful because of higher average levels of education. As a result, the relative success of Caribbean immigrants “may largely be a result of differential acceptance by American society” and not innate cultural factors (Dodoo, pg. 542).

Other research suggests that there is, in fact, no advantage associated with West Indian ethnicity. In her 1991 study, Suzanne Model found that although there are significant earning differences between black and white men, a similar difference does not emerge between black and white women. She concludes that the racial differences in male earnings are “unaccounted for by measurable traits and more likely attributable to discrimination or to cultural factors” (Model, pg. 272). However, the difference between genders indicates that race and ethnicity are not the only factors that impact the economic and academic success of minorities. While Model recognizes that cultural differences that affect work ethic and participation in society (Ogbu’s theory) cannot be definitively disproved through data, they do not “mesh well with what is known about immigrant behavior” (pg. 273).

Ultimately, the truth about the so-called West Indian advantage remains unclear and continues to generate considerable scholarly research. This persistent focus, some researchers assert, is negative itself because it serves to only detract focus from inter-race

relations. Put simply, small intra-racial differences are insignificant when compared with much more expansive problems of racial inequality. In her 2004 study, Jemima Pierre discusses the divisive and harmful effects of an overemphasis on Black immigrant ethnicity. Although she concedes that Black immigrants and native-born African Americans certainly do not have “identical processes of racial and ‘ethnic’ identity formation,” Pierre states, “processes that are labeled ethnicity are inextricable bound to ideas of race (pg. 161). Because race persists as an important aspect of a socioeconomic hierarchy, any attempt to avoid the category of race should be met with caution. Pierre insightfully concludes that a focus on ethnicity confines progressive discussions to “intra-racial” relationships instead of focusing on more significant power relations. Furthermore, it is illogical to overemphasize differences between race and ethnicity because they are closely bound.

The myth of the West Indian advantage may in part be based in truth. While scholars have largely discredited the notion of West Indian immigrant success over native-born blacks, black immigrants have relative success when compared with other immigrant groups. Their success among immigrants may contribute to the inaccurate conclusion that West Indians are more successful than African Americans.

*- Part III: Why Do Parents Choose? -*

Proponents of open choice policies argue that increased choice in public education is a tide that will lift all boats. The fundamental theory behind school choice is that market pressures will stimulate positive change. Historically, students would normally enroll in their nearest public school. Aside from private or parochial schools, parents had little

choice in schooling. Low-income parents unable to afford the steep financial commitment private schools often require were essentially left without any choice. Public school choice policies challenge traditional structures by introducing supply and demand to education. Because parents are theoretically free to choose any intra-district school, bureaucratic school districts are exposed to market forces. Put simply, school choice policies force school districts to quickly and effectively evolve to best serve the needs of their students. Economic and enrollment pressures would force school administrators to redesign and reallocate services in order to most effectively serve students. The touted benefits of school choice are twofold. Student achievement will increase while schools simultaneously become more financially efficient. However, how and if these benefits actually materialize in urban school districts is unclear. There are two major questions that guide school choice research. The first: are low-income, less-educated parents prepared to make successful decisions regarding school choice? The second: Even if all parents can choose equally, will they? (Schneider et al, pg. 491)

Educational scholars largely agree that socioeconomic and racial identity affect patterns of school choice. However, it remains unclear how and why differences emerge. It is extremely important to understand why parents choose schools. In many respects, school choice is a misnomer; socioeconomic factors can significantly affect how families “choose” especially among low-income families. Additionally, because school choice policies are often unilaterally based on a white middle class centric understanding of schooling preferences, they may not be effective for the low-income minority populations they are often created to help. School choice even has the potential to increase racial and

economic segregation. Critics of school choice contend that access to choice is compromised in several significant ways.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is designed to provide a basic understand of school choice preferences. RCT ascribes to the understanding that families construct their schooling preferences based on real-world circumstances. However, this theory does not adequately reflect the multi-faceted process of choice because “it treats a crucial construct – preferences – as exogenous to the inquiry” (Bell, 2008, pg. 121). This theory applies an overly formulaic understanding to the process of school choice although parental preferences are anything but formulaic. In many respects, “the existing debate on school choice is characterized by zealous oversimplification and lack of nuance on all sides” (Stulberg, pg.157). This means that school choice is often defined and understood in overly narrow contexts and, therefore, cannot include complex dynamics between race and power. In her historically grounded exploration of school choice of African Americans, Lisa Stulberg admits that the success of school choice will inherently be controversial because school reform itself is heavily intertwined with patterns of racial hegemony. Parent’s schooling preferences cannot be defined in simple terms because they are constructed personal experiences, histories, and emotions. As a result, parents cite a large variety of reasons that lead them to choose a particular school. Ultimately, there is no model that can predict school choice. Any attempt to concretely define choice patterns or create a rigid hierarchy of preferences is superficial and inadequate.

In their quantitative study of 400 parents in two inner-New York City neighborhoods and two suburban New Jersey neighborhoods, Schneider et al.’s research

aligns with the existing body of research. Unsurprisingly, they concluded that parents of different socioeconomic and racial groups have different preferences for schooling. However Schneider et al. contend that these differences are not manifested as most research predict. This means that researchers need to challenge conventionally held beliefs about public schooling and the roles of race and ethnicity in academic success.

In their 2007 quantitative study of nearly 2,500 parents of charter schools students in the Indianapolis region, Stein, Goldring, and Cravens examined the reasons parents chose to leave their traditional public school for a charter school. Unsurprisingly, the majority of parents surveyed responded that academic quality was the most important motivation for school choice. Using AYP as a measure of school academic success, the authors found that “only one-third of students, on average, chose to enroll in charter schools that had passed AYP” (Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, pg. 122). Furthermore, in their study almost one-third of parents enrolled their child in a new charter school without any AYP indicator. Given that AYP (although imperfect) is one of the most visible indicators of academic quality, the authors conclude that a preference for better academics is not as clear-cut and finite as it might seem. Parents’ judgment of academic quality is not always based on objective data. A school’s academic quality is often synthesized from social networks subjective conclusions. Consequently, parents’ preferences for schools with higher quality academics does not equate with academic quality as defined by educational researchers.

Researchers widely question if low-income and less-educated parents are as well equipped as wealthier more-educated parents to make informed schooling decisions. It is important to note that this not endorsing a deficit mindset towards low-income or minority

parents. Rather, because well-informed school choice decisions often require high levels of computer literacy and large time commitments, low-income less-educated parents can find themselves at a disadvantage born of their economic limitations. The ability to choose is particularly important significant for choice sets, the portfolio of schools from which parents can choose. Initially, low-income and middle-income parents consider a portfolio of schools that are similar. However, low-income parents largely choose failing, nonselective, and free schools while middle and upper class parents generally choose non-failing and selective schools (Bell, 2009).

In current literature, there are two major explanations for this divergence. The first, as described by Schneider et al., is based on the idea that differences among parents across various socioeconomic classes induce different choice preferences. As a result of their socioeconomic status, minority and working class parents want and need something different than white, middle-class parents. Schneider et al. found that low-income parents value schools that “perform the bedrock function of providing a safe environment in which the fundamentals of education are delivered” (pg. 498). Additionally, these parents are acutely aware of the “gate keeping points” their children must pass to land comfortably in the middle class. In the second explanation, Bell counters this explanation by discussing that low-income, less-educated parents are simply not well prepared to make informed schooling decisions. She discusses that by nature of their education, higher-educated parents are more empowered to conceptualize academic success more holistically and not rely on more basic indicators, such as test scores or AYP designation. Furthermore, because of their higher socioeconomic status, middle-class parents are not as aware of the “educational gate points” that Schneider et al. present as working class parents. Whether



ultimately due to preference according to Schneider et al. or unequal ability according to Bell, a preference emphasizing quantities of a holistic education is a luxury low-income parents are not afforded.

With the advent of a market system in public education, parents become consumers and school choice is framed similarly to a major household purchase. Much like the process of purchasing a new car parents are expected to research options before they make a decision about a school. Consequently, the availability of information to parents significantly affects choice preferences. However, adequate access to and comprehension of information can vary widely across socioeconomic groups.

*- Part IV: Gendered Expectations & Generational Change -*

Discussions of gendered and generational variations are largely absent from Ogbu's theory. Admittedly, Ogbu does briefly discuss this idea by stating, "children of immigrant minorities are voluntary minorities like their foreign-born parents" (Ogbu & Simmons, pg. 166). He further argues that although later generations, such as fourth-generation minorities, often have limited or no direct connection to their an immigrant generation their education is nonetheless "influenced by the community forces of their forebears" (pg. 166). In short, Ogbu is relying on the assumption that there is no significant intergenerational variation among immigrant populations. While this assumption might work reasonably well within the involuntary minority subcategory simply given the nature of its characteristics, considerable research shows that there are significant intergeneration changes within immigrant populations.

In her ethnographic study of Caribbean and Latino dominant neighborhoods in inner city New York, Nancy Lopez suggests that there are large and complex differences among first- and second-generation immigrants. Lopez creates a biting critique of the severe inequalities that are pervasive throughout the impoverished neighborhoods and the starkly inferior local public high school. Lopez's research suggests that while many first generation immigrants do not fit into Ogbu's voluntary classification, later generations exemplify many characteristics of voluntary minorities. Not only did Lopez find second-generation immigrants more likely to fit Ogbu's theory than their parents but also the gendered dynamic at the high school significantly impacted "women's views about the role of education in their lives" (p. 89). Even more significantly perhaps, "women, more so than men, actively voiced their social critique of substandard schooling by demanding an education" (Lopez, 90). Female students were much more likely than male students at this school to recognize that an education, particularly at the university level, represents a considerable step toward independence and socioeconomic advancement. This strong gender dichotomy has significant implications for school choice because it signals that many parents might tailor school expectations to gender and, consequently, school choice preferences.

There has been considerable research on the intersection between race and class with school choice. However, the role of gender has largely been unaddressed in previous research and consequently little is understood about the important role that gender appears to play in school choice. In her qualitative study of 14 African-American mothers, Cooper (2007) acknowledges that school choice is a racially oriented process. However, she asserts that gender is equally significant. As result of a history of oppression and

resistance, African-American women develop a strong personal commitment to find equitable education for their children. School choice in the African-American community is signaled as “motherwork” and a critical form of political resistance for Black mothers. Cooper’s substitutes her term, “positioned school choice” for the Rational Choice Theory, which has previously been discussed as inadequate. Positioned school choice incorporates the subjective, complex, and culturally relevant nature of school choice. Most importantly perhaps, Cooper’s theory recognizes that it is inappropriate to try to understand the choice process of African-American mothers through “Anglocentric norms and decontextualized assumptions” (p. 508). While choice varies significantly across socioeconomic lines it also is heavily dependent on the gender of both the parent and child. Ultimately, Cooper’s research suggest that more research is needed regarding the role of gender in school choice and, additionally, more outreach is needed to incorporate fathers, especially within minority populations, into school choice decisions.

## Methods

---

This study is based largely on qualitative data gathered through interviews with parents who have or recently had at least one child enrolled in public school in the Hartford region. Interviews were conducted exclusively with parents who identify as either non-immigrant African Americans or West Indian immigrants. There were 3 interviews with parents identifying as native-born African American and 5 with parents identifying as West Indian, for a total of 8 interviews. In addition to the interviews conducted exclusively for this project 2 interviews with West Indian immigrants from my Fall 2011 Senior Project were drawn upon. To identify prospective interview participants I contacted various cultural organizations and community organizers, such as the West Indian Social Club and leaders at Hartford schools that serve large West Indian immigrant and African American populations.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and lasted, on average, 22 minutes. The identity of each participant and any specific information, such as school name, are kept anonymous. All names used are pseudonyms and all recordings were deleted after the interview was transcribed. During the interviews, parents were asked three foundational questions regarding background information about their child, their experiences with school choice, and their family history. Specific follow up questions were asked after each foundational question as necessary. The structured interview guide used in all eight interviews is provided in Appendix A.

## Discussion

---

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of school performance does not sufficiently explain attitudes of West Indian immigrant or African American parents towards schooling in general or towards Hartford Public Schools specifically. However, this research suggests that Ogbu's theory provides a foundation to understand why West Indian and African American parents decide to participate in school choice or instead, opt to remain in their local school.

**Table A: Participation in School Choice**

	<b>West Indian</b>	<b>African American</b>
<i>Total</i>	5	3
<i>Applied to Magnet School</i>	2	0
<i>Accepted to Magnet School</i>	2	0
<i>Enrolled in Magnet School</i>	0	0

Out of a total of eight interviews, five were conducted with West Indian parents and three were conducted with African American parents. All participants were mothers, all participants live within the city of Hartford and all participants have at least one school-aged child currently enrolled in HPS. As evident in Table A (shown above), of all West Indian participants, only two applied to school choice. Of these two, both were offered seats at a choice school. Neither parent ultimately decided to enroll in a choice school. No African American participants chose to apply to a choice school. However, all parents regardless of ethnic identification at least acknowledged the option of school choice available to their

families. All parents, again regardless of ethnicity, clearly recognized that education is important for their children. Orientation towards HPS was generally positive, albeit vaguely. Only two parents voiced discontent against the school system or its policies.

*- Part I: General Orientation Towards Education in General -*

In the early 1990s Donna<sup>2</sup> emigrated with her young daughter from St. Lucia to join her husband in Hartford. Their years hope and scrimping and saving finally paid off: they were finally settled in America and the dream of social mobility was almost tangible. In many respects, Donna's story represents the prototypical immigrant experience: she came here searching for a higher quality life with better opportunities for her family. According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities such as Donna have a positive dual frame of reference. Through a comparison of their situation in the United States and their situation "back home" voluntary minorities "see more opportunities for success" (Ogbu & Simmons, pg. 170). All of the West Indian immigrants clearly identified a dual frame of reference. As one parent recounted:

*Back in Jamaica, I taught in the high school. I taught business subjects. And then we moved to Hartford, and um, I enrolled them in the school that was closest to me [...] Education is very important to me. I make it very important for my children. That's how to get ahead. I know that.*

This Hartford mother recognizes education as crucially important for her daughters. Throughout the interview she spoke to directly to education as necessary for her children's socioeconomic success. She spoke briefly about her oldest daughter, currently a senior in college: "my oldest is about to graduate. I'm happy. College, you know, is necessary and

---

<sup>2</sup> all names used are pseudonyms

she's done very well." In fact, every West Indian immigrant interviewed spoke extensively to comparisons between "back home" and their current situation in Hartford. Statements including "back then" and "before we left" were commonplace throughout the interviews. According to Ogbu, it would be expected that West Indian parents have a positive perception of education. While this data appears to support Ogbu's conclusions, it is important to also consider a similar application of Ogbu's theory to African American parents in Hartford.

The African American participants discussed a similar orientation towards education. Like the West Indian immigrants, parents identifying as African American unanimously agreed that education was positive. They recognized that for their children, a good education is the ticket out of the cycle of generational poverty. Chelsea, an African American mother in Hartford, mentioned, "school is important" and described that she wants something better for her children. For her, a good education and a comfortable future are nearly synonymous. According to Ogbu Chelsea, along with the two other African American mothers interviewed, would be classified an involuntary minority. Because these participants cannot readily trace their heritage to another country, they have presumably been in the United States for generations. Involuntary minorities are by definition those minorities who have been unwillingly incorporated into America, through slavery, conquest or other unfavorable means. Involuntary minorities consider themselves "American" because they do not identify with a particular black immigrant subgroup like West Indian.

While involuntary minorities also have a dual frame of reference, it is different and negative from that of voluntary minorities. Lacking the "back home" comparison voluntary

immigrants, involuntary minorities are only able to compare their current economic situation to those of middle-class whites. As a result, involuntary minorities are “critical of the school curriculum and mistrustful of teachers” (Ogbu & Simmons, pg. 171). Put simply, Ogbu discusses that involuntary minorities such as African Americans do not view public schools as vehicle for socioeconomic advancement. Therefore, according to Ogbu’s theory African American parents in Hartford should not be expected to have a positive association towards education. However, this study does not support this conclusion. Chelsea made it clear that she has a very positive orientation towards education. In fact, all three African American parents have highly positive views towards education. For them, education is the “golden ticket” out of a life of poverty. This study suggests that Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory of school performance does not sufficiently predict the overall views of education for African American parents in Hartford. More generally, this suggests that Ogbu’s theory might not reliably predict minority parent’s attitude towards education because all parents interviewed regardless of ethnicity had positive views to schooling in general.

*- Part II: Orientation Toward Hartford Public Schools -*

It is clear that all eight parents interviewed had a strong positive orientation towards education. It becomes less clear regarding orientation towards Hartford Public Schools specifically. Two parents revealed either distrust or dissatisfaction with HPS. Of these two parents, one identifies as West Indian while the other identifies as African American. The remaining five parents did not acknowledge any distrust or dissatisfactions with HPS and remained generally neutral. Any specific opinions of HPS were only vaguely positive with parents unenthusiastically reporting that the school as either “good,” “OK” or



that they were only generally “satisfied”. Any resolute opinions that parents expressed were negative. No parents interviewed expressed a strong positive orientation to HPS. This suggests that minority parents, on average, are relatively satisfied with HPS unless they had specific experience that instills an unrelentingly negative opinion. While it is possible that Ogbu’s theory might sufficiently predict orientation towards local school systems, a more comprehensive research with a larger sample population is necessary to verify any conclusion.

Both parents who expressed negative opinions about HPS referenced specific negative experiences. It is important to note that while negative, they did not express anger or distrust with HPS overall. Both parents spoke about negative experiences with individual teachers. The African American parent recounted that her daughter “had a bad teacher” because she “couldn’t talk to her [the teacher]” because the teacher rarely responded to messages and was generally unenthusiastic towards parent-teacher interaction. The other parent, a West Indian, expressed negative opinions because again she found the school “unresponsive” and that other parents might “not feel comfortable supporting their child there” because of negative staff interactions. While these parents expressed a sincere disapproval at HPS, their negative opinions are restricted to concrete events and do not assert that the school system itself is inherently bad or unresponsive.

*- Part III: Orientation Towards School Choice -*

Overall, there were no strong opinions voiced either in support or against the concept of school choice. Both West Indian parents who applied for admission to a regional

magnet school discussed highly positive perceptions of the choice schools they were applying to. However, neither of these two parents discussed feelings towards the more abstract concept of school choice. According to Ogbu's theory, voluntary immigrants such as West Indians should have a positive orientation towards school choice. Voluntary immigrants should theoretically have a higher rate of participation in school choice because enrolling in a magnet school, which in Hartford generally have more positive academic reputations, would further increase the academic opportunities for their child. However, this was not the case because no West Indian parents chose to enroll in a choice school. No West Indian parent directly discussed school choice as an added tool for socioeconomic advancement. Although choice schools were "good" or "more challenging" academically, no parent described school choice as the better method to get ahead in society. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that there were two West Indian parents who at least applied to school choice.

The three African American parents interviewed also did not express any positive or negative orientation to school choice. Although they recognized the availability of choice, no opinions regarding the concept of school choice were voiced during the interviews. It is important to recognize that none of the African American parents applied for school choice. When asked why they did not apply to school choice, parents simply responded, "I didn't apply," "we didn't think about it," or a similarly worded answer. Ultimately all parents in this study chose their local neighborhood school, this study suggest that Ogbu's theory might adequately explain differences in school choice participation. Albeit minor, ethnic differences did emerge between West Indian and African American parents regarding

participation in school choice that correlate with Obgu's theory. However, more research is needed before any substantial conclusion can be synthesized.

*- Part IV: Orientation Towards Location -*

Educational scholars widely agree that socioeconomic status significantly impacts school choice. However, it is widely disputed how these differences actually manifest themselves. Four of the parents interviewed indicated that it was important to enroll their children in a school where they would not find themselves socially isolated. This sentiment was particularly strong among West Indian participants who discussed the importance of cultural history. One mother, Bethany, remarked that it was important her son "was part of the community," referencing the multiple West Indian cultural organizations present in the North End of Hartford. Passing her cultural history along to her son is critically important for Bethany, as it was for several other West Indian parents. Because of this preference, Bethany preferred to send her daughter to a school with a significant West Indian population. This theme also appeared in my previous school choice research conducted during Fall 2011. Similarly, it suggests that race is a motivation for school choice. As one parent remarked during an interview, "and the other thing, to be honest with you, when I look at the racial make up of the schools, I didn't want my child to be one of ten black children in that school population of 800 or 600 or 500 odd students." None of the African American parents discusses race or community representation as a factor in school choice.

While Bethany's preference might suggest that race or ethnicity plays a significant role in school choice, in reality it does not. It is extremely important to recognize that

Bethany enrolled her daughter in the closest school. Despite readily acknowledging the availability of other school options through the Hartford intra-district choice program Bethany responded “no” when asked if she had considered any other schools. She further explained that it was necessary that her daughter attended a school within the neighborhood. Logistically, it would have been extremely challenging to have her daughter enrolled in a school in a different part of the city. Transportation and childcare would have been overwhelming for Bethany and her husband given their work schedules. Enrolling their daughter in a different school was simply not an option. Ultimately, Bethany’s preference for a school with a significant West Indian population is a preference rooted in convenience. In the interview, Bethany made it clear that the proximity was the primary reason for her choice. Although, it is impossible to know if Bethany would have chosen a different school had her local school not had a strong West Indian population. Bethany described a clear hierarchy of preferences that governs her school choice. While her stated preference for a West Indian community was important, it was eclipsed by location. Although school preferences may be partially driven by race or ethnicity, they are not controlled by race or ethnicity

This research emphasizes a very significant question: does proximity matter more to low-income minority parents? This research suggests that yes, proximity is more important for low-income minority parents than it is for middle-class parents. This is true for two significant reasons. Firstly, because low-income parents are more likely to be limited by logistical problems of attending a different, such as a longer commute or a different dismissal time in the afternoon. Secondly, some minority groups may be more likely to consider school demographics. The majority of West Indian parents interviewed

mentioned the importance of the community at their school. Of the four parents who mentioned community, all either directly or indirectly referred to the presence of a West Indian community at their school. Given the trend that ethnically similar minorities often live together in the same geographic catchment areas, they often attend the same schools. In Hartford specifically, all West Indian immigrants interviewed lived in the same zip code. This would suggest that because a small number of Hartford neighborhood schools serve a disproportionately large percentage of West Indian immigrants, West Indian parents are less inclined to consider schools outside of their local neighborhoods where their children would inevitably be a racial or ethnic minority.

*- Part V: Hierarchies of Choice: How Do Parents Really Choose? -*

The example of Bethany signals that school choice represents a complex hierarchy of preferences that are reliant upon socioeconomic realities. Put simply, most parents have many preferences regarding education. These might include: school size, building appearance, academic quality, or extracurricular or athletic options among other characteristics. For many parents, however, one characteristic often trumps all others. That is to say, school choice often is reduced to one characteristic that, frequently as a result of socioeconomic status, must be considered at the expense of other characteristics. Additionally, there are many characteristics that lower socioeconomic status parents are prepared to consider. For example, Donna made it very clear that she highly values education for her children. Unsurprisingly, she wanted her daughters to attend a school with strong academics and varied extracurricular offerings. For her, the best meant a

regional magnet school. After applying to multiple magnet schools she ultimately chose to keep her daughters in their neighborhood school. One might assume that Donna was simply sacrificing academic excellence for convenience. But, that is not true. She happily conceded that she is very satisfied with her neighborhood school and, ultimately, it was the best choice for her family. According to Donna, her children received both a “good education” and were able to remain “part of the community.”

It is very important to understand why Donna ended up choosing her neighborhood school over various regional magnet schools. Like every parent, she wants the best for her children. However, Donna’s school preferences are impacted by real-world constraints. Much like Bethany, Donna did not have reliable transportation available to her and that would have significantly hindered her ability to actively participate in her daughters’ school life. Donna and her daughters were not afforded a choice because the local school was the only option realistically available to them. Considerable research has been based on the assumption all parents value academic performance is of foremost importance and any other characteristic, such as demographics or size, are secondary. Any parent who does not ascribe to this hierarchy is labeled “ill informed or irrational” because factors such as location or availability of after-school care are considered “irrelevant to educational quality” (Hamilton & Guin, pg. 49). While an overemphasis on non-academic programs at schools is a legitimate concern, the assertion that academics are uniformly the most important quality parents should consider is inappropriate. This conclusion does not recognize that “diversity of contexts in which families are making decisions” (pg. 49).

In truth, many parents consider a school’s academic reputation the most important factor for school choice. Both parents who applied to a magnet school through the choice

program explained that their decision to do so was motivated largely by the academic reputation of the schools. Although admittedly neither parent chose to enroll their child at a magnet school, it is important to note that their choice to consider a magnet school was motivated by academics. Academic quality, in fact, was the only explanation either parent offered. However, it becomes more complex when parents or researchers attempt to define or measure academic quality. While most scholarly research defines academic quality by using standardized test scores or AYP designations, it is unclear if parents use the same parameters to evaluate the academic quality of a school.

The adaptation of a market model for public education requires that parents have access to quality information about schools. Recent research has shown that parents frequently do not have access to the most useful type of information about schools. This is the case because “educational processes in schools are relatively esoteric and largely obscured from the direct observations of current and potential consumers” (Lubienski, pg. 113). Consequently, parents do not reliably have access to information about a school’s academic quality. In areas where information about test scores or AYP designation is available to students new questions arise. For example, in Hartford parents have access to the online program “SmartChoices” (<http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/>) that provides not only test scores and school demographics, but also the change in test scores over the previous year. Firstly, as a result of the pervasive poverty in the city, many Hartford families do not have easy in-home access to the Internet, and therefore, services such as SmartChoices. Just as data is not uniformly available, “access to information, and knowledge about how to search and interpret websites, is not uniformly distributed” (Dougherty, Zannoni et al, pg. 28). Secondly, test scores offer only a limited representation

of the academic environment at a school. While standardized test scores are only one facet of educational quality parents should consider the scores are often the only indicator available.



## Conclusion

---

School choice in Hartford is intended to increase the academic and social opportunities for students in the city's low-income and racially isolated neighborhoods. In Hartford, there are two major causes for the wide array of choices offered to parents. Firstly, the *Sheff vs. O'Neill* case stipulates an increased availability of magnet schools because Hartford's *de facto* segregation violates the state constitution and the district's students, consequently, are receiving a clearly inferior education. Secondly, the district embarked on a comprehensive reform strategy designed to turn around the chronically failing school system by created an all-choice system. Even with the large spectrum of choice available to parents, both in Hartford and nationally, there is surprisingly little agreement within scholarly research regarding parental preference in schooling. Educational scholars widely agree that patterns of choice rely heavily on socioeconomic factors, such as race, household income, or parental education. However, there is little agreement in how these differences actually manifest themselves. Furthermore, while there is considerable research focused on ethnic and racial differences, there is little scholarly research focusing on the intersection of ethnicity and school choice.

Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance is not particularly well suited to provide a comprehensive understanding of differences in school choice preferences between racially similar but ethnically different minorities. The immigrant/involuntary minority dichotomy does not reliably predict any differences in parental views on school choice application processes. This study suggests that while Ogbu's theory might be able to sufficient explain differences in orientation to school choice

and orientation to local schools, Ogbu's theory does not adequately explain orientation towards education in general or the urban school district between West Indian immigrant and native-born African American parents in Hartford. Moreover, Ogbu's theory might not be readily applicable to school choice because the theory relies on a seemingly artificial dichotomy and contains multiple caveats or contradictions that might limit its application to the complicated processes that define parental preference. Before any scholarly assessments can be made regarding the applicability of the cultural-ecological theory to school choice, more research is necessary.

## **Limitations & Future Research**

---

In some respects, this research is limited by the limited size of the survey population. However, it is extremely important to recognize that this does not invalidate any implications or conclusions drawn from this study. The choice to use qualitative research methods was deliberate because only ethnography effectively captures the perspectives of parents. It would be useful to have further studies that rely more on quantitative methods. Because a survey would allow researchers to include a considerably larger sample population it would be easier to coordinate larger population-wide trends. However, quantitative methods are insufficient to obtain a clearer picture of individual preferences that enable researchers to develop a more holistic understanding of school choice. Additional research, both qualitative and quantitative, is necessary to improve both academic and social opportunities for students and families in high-need and racially isolated urban communities.

## Works Cited:

---

- Bell, C. A. (2007). Space and place: Urban parents' geographical preferences for schools. *The Urban Review* 39.4: 375-404.
- Bell, C. A. (2008). Social class differences in school choice. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives* (pp. 121-148). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Bell, C. A. (2009). All choices created equal? the role of choice sets in the selection of schools." *Peabody Journal of Education* 84.2: 191-208.
- Burns, P. (2002). The intergovernmental regime and public policy in hartford, connecticut. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 24(1), 55-73.
- Chavkin, N., & Williams, D. (1993). Minority parents and the elementary school: Attitudes and practices. In N. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society* (pp. 73-83). State University of New York Press.
- Cooper, C. W. (2007). School choice as "motherwork": valuing African-American women. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(5), 491-512.
- Cummings, J. (1997) "Minority Status and Schooling in Canada." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 28(3): 411-430.
- Dodoo, F. Nii-Amoo. (1997). "Assimilation Differences among Africans in America." *Social Forces*. 76(2): 527-546.
- Dougherty, J., Zannoni, D., Chowhan, M., Coyne, C, Dawson, B., Guruge, T., and Nukic, B. How Does Information Influence Parental Choice? The Smart Choices Project in Hartford, Connecticut. Trinity College, April 28, 2010. Available from the Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, Connecticut (<http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu>)
- Gibson, M. A. (1997) "Complicating the Immigrant/Involuntary Minority Typology." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 28(3): 431-454.
- Hamilton, L. S., Guin, K. (2005). "Understanding How Families Choose Schools" In J. R. Betts & T. Loveless (Eds.), *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Education Policy* (pp. 40-60). Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Kilgour-Dowdy, J. (2002). "Ovuh Dyuh". In L. Delpit & J. Kilgour Dowdy (Eds.), *The Skin that We Speak* (pp. 3-13). New York, NY: The New Press.

- Lopez, N. (2003). *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Lubienski, C. (2008). "The Politics of Parental Choice: Theory and Evidence on Quality Information". In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives* (pp. 99-119). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Model, S. (1991). "Caribbean Immigrants: A Black Success Story?" *International Migration Review* 25(2): 248-276
- Model, S. (2008). *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation
- Pierre, J. (2004). "Black Immigrants in the United States and the 'Cultural Narratives' of Ethnicity." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 11(2): 141-170
- Perez, M. "Two Tales of One City: A Political Economy of the New York City Public High School Admissions Process". CWEALF, Hartford, CT. 22 February 2012. Lecture.
- Ogbu, J. Simmons, H. (1998) "Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. 29(2): 155-188.
- Smith, E. (2002). "Ebonics: A Case History". In L. Delpit & J. Kilgour Dowdy (Eds.), *The Skin that We Speak* (pp. 3-13). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Schneider, M. et al. (1998). School choice and culture wars in the classroom: What different parents seek from education." *Social Science Quarterly* 79.3 (1998): 490-501
- Stein, M. L., Goldring, E. B. & Cravens, X. "Do Parents Do As They Say?". In Mark Berands, Marisa Cannata, & Ellen B. Goldring (Eds.), *School choice and school improvement* (pp. 105-123). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Stulberg, L. M. (2008). *Race, Schools & Hope: African Americans and School Choice after Brown*. New York, NY. Teacher's College Press.
- The Economist. (1996). Race in America: Black Like Me. 11 May, p. 27
- Walsh, N. (2011) "Why Parents Choose: Patterns of School Choice and the Role of the Hartford Community School". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2012. Trinity College Digital Repository, <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/theses/85>
- Waters, M. C. (1999) *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. New York: Cambridge, Mass: Russell Sage Foundation; Harvard University Press.

Weiss, H., Mayer, E., Kreider, H., Vaughan, M., Dearing, E., Hencke, R., Pinto K. (2003)  
“Making It Work: Low-Income Working Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's  
Education” *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(4): 879-901

US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. (2009). *Hartford city, Connecticut:  
Selected economic characteristics 2005-2009*.

**Appendix A**

---

**Hartford Parent Informed Consent and Interview Guide** (updated February 10, 2012)  
by Nathan Walsh & Jack Dougherty, Cities Suburbs & Schools Project at Trinity College

Hello, my name is Nathan Walsh, and I would like to interview you about school options for Hartford children for a study at Trinity College, to help us learn more about what parents think. The questions are voluntary, your answers are anonymous, we can complete it within five minutes or continue further if you wish, and you can stop at any time.

- Are you willing to be interviewed?
- I won't ask for your name, but may I record our interview? [If no, then stop. If yes, turn on recorder and verbally thank participant for allowing you to record the interview.]
- Do you live in Hartford? [If no, then stop.]
- Do you have school-age children? [If no, then stop].

The interview consists of three main questions, and the first one is:

1) Tell me more about your child(ren) and his/her/their school(s)

*Ask these follow-up prompts if needed:*

- Which school(s) do s/he/they attend, and what grade levels?
- Are you satisfied with your child(ren)'s school(s)?
- Do you feel welcomed at your child(ren)'s school(s)?
- What are your hopes or plans for your child(ren)?

2) My next main question is about school choice. Have you heard about any school choice options for your child(ren), or submitted any applications?

*Ask these follow-up prompts if needed:*

- Have you heard about or applied to magnet schools?
  - the Open Choice program in suburban schools?
  - charter schools or technical schools?
  - the Hartford Public Schools choice program?
- Why did you (or didn't you) consider applying to a school choice program?

3) Now let's wrap up with some background questions. Tell me about your family history.

*Ask these follow-up prompts if needed:*

- Were you born in Hartford or did you move here?
- Where are your parents from?
- (If different family lines): Do you have stronger ties to one side of the family?
- What is your zip code?
- In your own words, how do you identify your race or ethnicity?
- What is the last level of schooling that you completed?

Thanks for participating. [If person would like more information, tear off bottom of this form]

\*\*\*\*\*

For more information about this Hartford parent interview research project:  
Nathan Walsh, student researcher email: nathan.walsh@trincoll.edu  
Jack Dougherty, faculty advisor email: jack.dougherty@trincoll.edu  
Cities Suburbs and Schools Project at Trinity College (<http://commons.trincoll.edu/cssp>)