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“If I Had More Information”: The Unresponsiveness of the Hartford Region Open Choice Program and the Potential for New Sites of Decision-Making

Mary Morr

INTRODUCTION

In theory, the Hartford Region Open Choice Program (abbreviated as Open Choice) represents a major advancement in the recognition of the educational rights of students and their families. The program is an initiative to increase information about and choice among school options following the fifth grade. The ability to choose one’s school, instead of being assigned based upon residency, has the potential of empowering youth to determine for themselves their educational destiny and of forcing the educational system to respond to their needs. This is especially important in the context of the education of minorities in urban settings like Hartford, as these groups are traditionally the most ignored and assaulted by the school system and therefore stand to benefit the most from a program that increases school accountability. The result of school choice depends upon how effectively the program is implemented; simply allowing families to apply to different schools does not automatically ensure that a choice exists and is being exercised.

I began researching the topic of school choice expecting to uncover the ways in which the educational institution, because of its inherent lack of confidence in youth agency, was actively ignoring the voices of the students and obstructing them from exercising fully their choice of school to attend. While the data I collected does clearly point to a deficiency in the system, the problem is not that students are being purposefully denied the opportunity to make decisions in regards to their education. Rather, the problem rests with the incomplete and ineffective distribution of information on students’ options.

However well-intentioned Open Choice and its administrators may be, the lack of clear information about each school has effectively robbed Hartford students of a valuable opportunity and rendered them choice-less.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Informing this research are multiple previous studies on the education of Latino/a students in urban settings. The concept of a failing school choice system that inspired this study has been explored previously by Susan Rosenbloom (2009). Through an investigation of the school choice process

in New York City, Rosenbloom discovered that an insufficient amount of quality information on schooling options and a lack of involvement of adults with resources in the decision-making process had led to a significant number of students being left behind by the system. Rosenbloom concluded that students in New York City were receiving only the *trappings of choice*; their school placement was not based upon any meaningful decision, yet the system design ensured that these students' lack of choice was overlooked. Proposed explanations for the nonexistence of student choice are influenced by the concepts of *educación* and *confianza* in safe spaces. As described by Angela Valenzuela (1999), Latino/a families and students expect more than academic instruction from schools. The concept of *educación* is much broader in scope than the equivalent English term and includes moral and social development. Valenzuela's interviews with Mexican-American students revealed that they envisioned the foundation of education to be relationships of caring and respect, but that such an atmosphere was typically absent in school.

Andrea Dyrness' (2007) work with Latina mothers demonstrated the necessity of safe spaces for the facilitation of critical engagement with the educational system. For the mothers involved in the study, their ability to assess schools and take action to improve them was nurtured by an environment of *confianza*, a combination of trust in others and confidence in one's self. Foundational to this atmosphere was the fact that the mothers met in a comfortable home environment and that, in the course of discussion, their personal experiences were acknowledged and respected. Finally, this study's focus on alternatives to the school as a site for evaluation of educational options draws on Luis Urrieta Jr.'s (2009) description of "playing the game" as a tool for activism. Urrieta's research on Chicano/a agency revealed that strategically working within the educational system could be a means to reshaping that system and possibly more effective than trying to challenge the system directly and from outside.

METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the ways students evaluate their options and exercise their rights under the Open Choice program, I worked as a participant-observer at Hartford Community Center (HCC), which self-describes as "a multicultural agency here to help our families and our community," (HCC Inc.). From February 11 until May 6, 2010, I spent three hours a week working at HCC as a tutor and mentor during the after-school program. Alongside fulfilling my official role, I made ethnographic observations of the students each day I participated in the program and, beginning April 22, I conducted individual interviews with students and staff members. Over the course of three weeks, I conducted seven formal interviews; two were with adult staff members (first and last names given), and five were with female fifth grade students from Hartford Elementary School. (All but

one participant felt uncomfortable with my use of a tape recorder, so their comments have been paraphrased.) That my student interviews involved only female participants was unintentional; it was a consequence of the fact that only female students returned their parent consent forms. The students selected were chosen based upon their attendance at Hartford Elementary School. Students can attend Hartford Elementary through the eighth grade, but many choose to transfer after fifth grade through Open Choice. This school is located in the same neighborhood as HCC, and most of the students that participate in the after-school program attend Hartford Elementary; their insights are therefore of special importance to an investigation of how HCC can better serve its students as they make schooling decisions. I limited my interviews to participants in the fifth grade because these students have recently completed the school choice process and will be attending the middle school of (supposedly) their choosing come fall; as such, they had each had experiences that can inform the study of the exercise of school choice, and the emotions and memories of these experiences were likely to be fresh in their minds. All names used for people and locations are pseudonyms.

CONTEXT

Students and their families are negotiating Open Choice within a context of both challenges and community-based responses. HCC is located in the center of the Hartford Latino community in a neighborhood with Latino/a residents comprising 71.6 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, SF 1 QT-P9, 2000). This area, like many urban spaces, faces a variety of serious challenges. 72.5 percent of the residents in the area immediately surrounding HCC speak a language other than English at home; of this group, Spanish is the language spoken by 67 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, SF 4 DP-2, 2000). The majority of residents (57.4 percent) do not have a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, SF 4 DP-2, 2000); 55.7 percent of people in the area are unemployed. The median family income is \$17,250 and 46.2 percent of families live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, SF 4 DP-3, 2000).

These factors combine to limit the resources that families have to navigate the educational system. The extreme poverty level means that families are unlikely to have tools, like computers and Internet access, that are increasingly assumed to be universally available. Parents often work multiple jobs and thus have less time to visit their students' schools and attend meetings (Morr, field notes, February 11, 2010). Furthermore, because many parents did not complete high school, they lack the personal experience to assist their students as they navigate the school system. That so many in the neighborhood speak a language other than English at home potentially limits the ability of families to communicate with teachers who are frequently monolingual English speakers. Yet, in spite of these significant problems, residents of the area have demonstrated resilience and have responded by developing a promisingly

supportive community. Main Street, the center of the neighborhood, has evolved into a meeting ground for interaction and relationship building between residents (Morr, field notes, April 1, 2010); the support systems that are formed in this space are fundamental to fostering strength in the face of struggle and in facilitating the transmission of experiences and lessons. There are a variety of support centers along Main Street that offer vital services to both youth and adults. There are even nontraditional spaces, such as the local library, that have assumed this role.

THE OBSTRUCTED FLOW OF INFORMATION FROM TEACHERS TO FAMILIES

Despite the apparent promise of Open Choice, my interviews were generally disheartening and demonstrated many of the shortcomings of Hartford's system. One student, Maritza, had a surprisingly emotional reaction to the topic of school choice. Maritza will be attending Hartford Elementary again in the fall because her parents did not even begin the process of selecting a school. They did not feel comfortable moving Maritza to a new school because they had very little information on their options and were even unaware of which schools in the area were public. When I asked Maritza why she did not attend the information night held at one of the local high schools, she seemed surprised and told me that she and her family had not been aware that this event was taking place. Maritza criticized her teachers for not communicating more effectively with her parents to guide them through the process. After hearing my repeated use of the term "school choice," Maritza made it clear in a forceful tone that she had not been given a choice and that this fact made her angry; she felt deprived of an opportunity she knew other students had access to, and she feared that she would be unhappy throughout middle school because of her circumstances. To end the interview on a more optimistic note, I asked Maritza what could be done to make the school choice process more effective. She commented that parents need assistance from the school to navigate their options. Although much of the information is online, many parents do not have access to computers. It was Maritza's belief that her parents would be likely to visit a place like HCC for assistance (Maritza, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

Within Maritza's story is an extreme example of the breakdown of the school choice system due to a failure on the part of the schools. If a student is unable to attend the school of his or her choice because the parents overlooked a deadline, the blame may fall primarily on the family; however, in a situation in which parents do not even begin the process of selecting a school because they have so little information about their options and the steps they need to take, a larger issue needs addressing. It should never be assumed, especially in a low-income neighborhood with limited resources, that because the information exists it is accessible to everyone in the community.

Maritza’s comment about parents’ lack of computer literacy paralleled a conversation I had with Alfredo Rodriguez, one of the administrators at HCC. Mr. Rodriguez was very critical of the school choice process, explaining that “people get lost in the system; they don’t know their options.” He considered the overwhelming majority of school choice decisions to be uninformed; for example, he explained how parents fail to consider private schools for their children because they are unaware of the availability of scholarships and believe that tuition is an insurmountable hurdle. According to Mr. Rodriguez, the culprit behind the misinformation leading to misguided choices is a culturally insensitive system:

The way they market the school options...doesn’t respond to the cultural needs and way of doing things of this community. If you’re going to go on TV and you promote X school, or school system, or alternative through the media, I don’t think that’s going to work with us. I think that’s wasting money and our resources. I think we work a lot on a one-on-one basis, personal contact. [...] In our cultural that personal touch is pretty important. (Alfredo Rodriguez, personal communication, April 22, 2010)

Whether it is due to unfamiliarity with technology, as was the case for Maritza’s parents, or due to the rejection of impersonal communication, as described by Mr. Rodriguez, the modes through which school information is currently provided are obstacles to effective decision making for school options. While the official school choice system could be redesigned to more effectively take community conditions and practices into consideration, community institutions might simply be a more useful knowledge source. In addition to providing information to families who lack computer access, the Hartford community is equipped with tools for moving neighborhood residents towards computer literacy. Local establishments, such as a computer café and the public library, offer daily instruction on computer and Internet use; their curriculum could easily be expanded to include lessons on navigating the websites related to school choice.

THE NECESSITY OF MULTIPLE SOURCES FOR EVALUATING SCHOOL CHOICE

Of all the girls interviewed, only one, Eva, felt fully satisfied with her school choice. In fact, Eva is the only student who will be leaving Hartford Elementary to attend a different school next year. Eva has enrolled in one of Hartford’s magnet schools; her satisfaction with this choice and anticipation for the coming school year radiated from her beaming smile and her excited tone of voice every time I asked her to talk about her schooling decision. When asked why she decided to enroll at the magnet school, Eva emphasized

the fact that her cousins already attend. For her, this family connection was important for two reasons. First, it would remove some of the stress from the transition to middle school because she would have the support of familiar faces. More importantly, however, her cousins were able to use their position to serve as liaisons between her family and the school, supplying a much richer and more personal portrait of the school than the official descriptions provided by the institution. For example, Eva has had a very negative experience with her teacher this year, so the reputation of the staff was an important consideration for her when making her school decision. All schools will claim to have exceptional teachers, but Eva's cousins were able to give more personal descriptions; their evaluation of the teachers at the magnet school is one reason why Eva expects to be very satisfied with her choice of middle school (Eva, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

Contrasting the stereotype of Latino/a youth as unintelligent and disengaged, Eva seemed astutely aware of the fact that she was able to effectively exercise her school choice because of a family connection that many of her peers lack. When asked if she felt that the school system had provided her family with enough knowledge of their options, Eva surmised that the amount would have been insufficient for those students who, unlike herself, were not advantageously positioned to gather information about the schools on their own (Eva, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Eva considered the discussions with her family to be the most useful and essential during her school selection experience. This conclusion does not necessarily reflect poorly on the school, but does demonstrate that there are some limitations to the amount of information schools can efficiently provide.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN "CHOICE," ACCORDING TO THE SCHOOL

Another student, Luisa, approached her school choice in manner similar to Eva's. The information Luisa learned and the advice she received from family discussions were most influential in her decision. While Eva's and Luisa's method of evaluating their school options was entirely legitimate, it is one that would likely have been ignored or discouraged by school officials.

During an interview with Estefani Ramirez, a school representative who helps coordinate HCC's tutoring program with Hartford Elementary's formal curriculum, I commented that I had heard several students emphasize the presence of family members or the positive reputation of teachers as a reason for wanting to attend a particular school. Ms. Ramirez responded, stating that the choice should rest primarily upon matching students' skills to the programs offered by schools. There is some validity to this, as students who attend schools that promote and utilize the abilities they already have generally perform better academically (Valenzuela, 1999). However, Ms. Ramirez also noted that she believed it unwise to consider factors such as peers and well-

liked teachers in the decision (Estefani Ramirez, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

The concern that underlies Ms. Ramirez’s use of the word “unwise” is somewhat understandable. Simply knowing someone at a school does not make that school the best learning environment for a particular student. However, her error lies in the fact that she views school choice as one-dimensional and delegitimizes additional evaluative tools that capture the multiple factors that affect a student’s *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999). This broader notion of education seems to be crucial when students discuss schooling alternatives with their extended families. These conversations must be recognized and encouraged in community spaces like HCC or else students will find themselves continually disappointed with the overall education they receive. Ms. Ramirez’s emphasis on objective data devalues the role of Latino families’ personal experiences in the evaluation of school choice. Because a central role of experiential knowledge has been documented to be crucial to developing a safe space (Dyrness, 2007), a standpoint like that of Ms. Ramirez’s reduces the likelihood that parents will accept the school site as a forum for discussion surrounding school choice. The types of at-home conversations criticized by Ms. Ramirez are important because basic comfort within a school is necessary for students to be able to concentrate. Mr. Rodriguez echoed this sentiment, explaining that the first part of success is that “the kids want to be there” (Rodriguez, personal communication, April 22, 2010). The factors that make a school “comfortable” are subjective and will be evaluated differently by different students. School pamphlets and brochures cannot help make these subjective evaluations, but open and personal conversations can.

DISTRUST AND DISTANCE FROM THE SCHOOL

An interview with Arely demonstrated the level of isolation students and their families feel from teachers. For reasons unknown to Arely, her mother had not turned in the necessary paperwork, so Arely had no choice but to continue attending Hartford Elementary in the sixth grade. Unaware of the implications of her experience with the school choice system, Arely felt underqualified for the interview and gave only short answers to most of my questions. However, a question regarding her teacher’s involvement in the process finally engaged this student. Arely described to me how, when asked by her teacher about whether she would be attending her top choice school, she lied and told him that she had been rejected. In truth, Arely was forced to continue at Hartford Elementary because of a technicality, but she said that her teacher yelled a lot and that she did not want to give him a reason to target her. When asked if he ever discovered the truth by speaking with her mother, Arely commented that her mother refrained from visiting the school because she also disliked her teacher’s tendency to raise his voice (Arely, personal communication, May 6, 2010).

Arely's experience is significant for two reasons. First, it exposes the weak relationship that many students have with their teachers. Second, it demonstrates the lack of a school-based forum for discussion of school choice. No matter the issue, it is detrimental to the development of students if they do not feel comfortable discussing problems with their teachers. This is especially true with Latino/a students, who consider a mutual relationship of caring to be central to *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999). Both students and their families entrust teachers to offer guidance and support throughout the educational experience, yet Arely's conscious decision to lie to her teacher demonstrates a disruption of this arrangement. It is certainly clear that Arely does not consider her relationship with the teacher to be one of caring. Rather than speaking openly and honestly with her teacher about the challenges she was facing in the school choice process, Arely censored her conversations and edited what she said to match what the teacher wanted and expected to hear. If this is a general trend in student-teacher relations, then students will face serious obstacles to gathering the information on school choice that they find relevant.

An example of possible consequences can be gleaned from my interview with Luisa. Although she was not accepted to her preferred school and will be staying at Hartford Elementary, Luisa had put serious thought into which school would best suit her. She decided on a large school because she feels more comfortable when she can blend into a crowd and avoid individual attention (Luisa, personal communications, April 29, 2010). If Luisa truly does feel more at ease in places where she can blend in, then she is likely to perform better at a larger school because feeling relaxed is a natural prerequisite to being able to focus and challenge oneself academically. However, the predominant professional standpoint is that small schools and more individual attention automatically equate to better learning, so Luisa's might avoid speaking with her teachers out of fear that they would invalidate her preferences.

Arely's comments show that parents do not consider schools to be a space for conversations on the topic of schooling options. Although the students I interviewed all wanted more information for their families, they were unlikely to ask their parents to attend a meeting at the school because they themselves do not feel comfortable at their school. Mr. Rodriguez had noticed that the students he works with find the school to be a threatening environment. In my interview with Mr. Rodriguez, his reason for considering the school an inappropriate place to hold an open discussion on school choice was, "I hear kids saying that the last thing that they want to do is stay after school at the school," (Rodriguez, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

“CHOICE,” ACCORDING TO THE SCHOOL

Not all schools are as hostile as those discussed by Mr. Rodriguez, but even in otherwise hospitable schools, one possible reason why parents reject this site as an open forum is the formulaic treatment of school choice by educators. During my interview with Ms. Ramirez, I asked what responsibilities the school should have in terms of providing information on school options. In a somewhat defensive tone, Ms. Ramirez responded that the school already fulfills its role by distributing information. In her opinion, school choice should entail parents using the data they are given to match their students' career interests to the school that focuses on related knowledge (Ramirez, personal communication, April 22, 2010). This manner of thinking reduces school choice to a simple equation in which only certain, predetermined facts are necessary to come to a single correct solution. It negates the need for evaluative discourse and fails to account for the wide array of factors that can make certain schools appealing or appropriate to students who come from diverse backgrounds and have individual needs. If Open Choice is truly a simple matching mechanism, then the implication is that students and their families do not actually have a choice; rather, they have a means of finding where the statistics say they belong.

The school system falsely assumes that once it is made available, all responsibility for collecting and evaluating the information is transferred to the parents. School employees, taking for granted the ease with which they can gather and analyze educational data, are insensitive to the difficulty of this task for many families. If a true choice of schools is to take place, families need to feel comfortable asking for help from the start, but the school environment does not encourage this. As in the case of Arely, fear of a teacher's negative and possibly condescending reaction inhibits families from asking for additional assistance.

Community spaces like HCC are more likely to be supportive, understanding, and nonjudgmental. For schools, the ultimate “output” is test scores, and it is easy for the students to become tools towards the end of better performance. Whether or not a student matures into a successful adult becomes a secondary concern for schools in a high-stakes testing atmosphere. However, for community sites, the goal is simply the advancement of the people served. Since the focus is truly on the individuals, more nurturing relationships can be established. A statement by Mr. Rodriguez captures this beautifully: “I went to college [...] so I have some kind of education that can help me to understand the process, and to get the information that I need in order to get something better for my son. But most of these people, they don't have that opportunity. So I think that whoever has that opportunity, that capacity, has to help the others. And that's why I'm here” (Alfredo Rodriguez, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

RETHINKING SITES FOR EVALUATION AND DECISION-MAKING

The scenario depicted in Mr. Ramirez's answers is troubling and reminiscent of cultural reproduction theory, in which students are channeled through the educational system to fill a role that has been externally determined for them (Moll, 2002). However, this situation persists only as long as students are primarily relying on teachers and other school officials for their information. If critical analysis of school options were to take place in community spaces where families felt comfortable, places in which *confianza* has been established (Dyrness, 2007), then important questions could be raised and addressed without fear of criticism or dismissal.

All of the students except for Eva commented that they would have chosen to attend a different school if they had been given more information. Based upon the dissatisfaction of these students with their school choice experience, it is clear that families require both more information and opportunities to discuss that information than they are currently being given in order to effectively exercise their school choice. The question that remains is whether the school itself should be altered so that it can perform this role, or whether independent community groups should be developed for this purpose.

As discussed previously, it is unlikely that parents would attend forums on school choice if they were held at school. The students I interviewed expressed that their parents would prefer discussions to be held in community spaces like HCC. One possible explanation for this could be that HCC is a known presence in the Hartford Latino/a community. The cultural cohesiveness present fosters acceptance and understanding. HCC employees, who are primarily Puerto Rican, share the culture of the majority of their students (Morr, field notes, February 11, 2010). Through the services they provide, the employees work with members of the community every day, sometimes on a very personal level, and thus are uniquely positioned to understand the needs of that community. Furthermore, the treatment of language at the community center makes communication not only possible, but also natural, comfortable, and enjoyable. The use of Spanish is actively encouraged at HCC. Students speak in English and Spanish, often times using both in the same conversation. They are never criticized for using Spanish or told to speak in English more frequently. In fact, the administrators themselves switch between the two languages (Morr, field notes, February 11, 2010). In such an environment, parents are much more likely to feel respected and included. They fear neither being portrayed as inferior or unintelligent if they cannot speak English fluently, nor do they fear being unable to have meaningful conversations with a rigidly monolingual staff. Such an environment is necessary to create productive discussions of school choice involving parents because without it, parents are unlikely to even show up.

An event in early March demonstrated the extent to which families feel comfortable and welcome at HCC. It was the birthday of one of the fifth graders and her family had decided to hold a surprise party at HCC. Rather than have a gathering in traditional spaces for celebration—such as the home or in a park—the girl’s family felt that the most appropriate place was the community center where the girl spent each day after school. Birthday parties are often intimate celebrations, so the family’s choice to host theirs at HCC indicates a relationship that is much deeper than that typically formed between families and teachers or school administrators. I later learned that the girl’s mother had recently died, and one of the site administrators, Casandra Sanchez, had assisted the family as the grandparents sought custody rights (Morr, field notes, March 4, 2010). Because HCC offers a variety of family services, it is very likely that the employees have developed similarly intimate relationships with other parents. When the depth of these connections are combined with the culturally-sensitive atmosphere of HCC, the result is a space that students and parents consider an extension of their home; a place where they feel welcome and at ease. These intimate bonds also make it more likely that the employees of community centers would follow up with parents throughout the school choice process, potentially preventing situations like Maritza’s in which parents who find the procedures confusing are forgotten.

There is no doubt that many educators care deeply about their students. However, despite the good intentions of the people working within, there are fundamental differences between Hartford Public Schools and HCC that obstruct the schools’ ability to foster conversations about school choice. One major challenge, as noted by Mr. Rodriguez, is that the school system in general is culturally removed from the families that it serves. Because many of the teachers do not share their students’ backgrounds, through no fault of their own they will find it difficult to relate to the strengths, weaknesses, needs, and desires of the Latino/a community. Additionally, because so few teachers speak Spanish, and those who do are discouraged from using it, there are impediments to communication between school officials and parents. While no official data was collected on the language background of the parents at HCC, most students noted that their parents spoke only Spanish when consent forms were distributed in different languages (Morr, field notes, April 22, 2010).

Community spaces like HCC serve as a more effective forum for discussions of school choice than the schools themselves. These spaces are directed by community leaders who have an intricate understanding of the needs of local families and who can tailor information on school choices accordingly. Thus they generate a welcoming atmosphere in which families feel comfortable expressing their concerns and speaking honestly about their experiences with the educational system. Finally, they are built on relationships between the employees and the families, and these connections allow the employees to

follow and monitor individual families as they move through the school choice process, answering questions and offering assistance along the way.

CONCLUSION

There are currently two major failures within the school choice system. Students and their families are not receiving enough, if any, information on their options, and beyond a simple comparison of school-produced data, they have no opportunity to critically evaluate the alternatives. As Ms. Ramirez indicated, the school system does host an informational session at the local high schools, but there is a fundamental difference between parents walking past school booths, being impersonally handed official fact sheets, and those families participating in an open forum where they are free to raise their questions and concerns about the various schools. Even if schools better provided and explained information, they still might not be the most comfortable spaces for such conversations. Places like HCC that are rooted in the community and offer an understanding and nonjudgmental atmosphere are inherently more compatible with the facilitation of constructive discussions surrounding school options. Still, to claim that community spaces can and should take on the role of facilitating the school choice process does not absolve schools of the responsibility to increase cultural sensitivity and teacher-family relationships. Schools' shortcomings are serious and have implications beyond those discussed here. Using community spaces as forums for discussions about school choice can be an indirect method of confronting these problems. The immediate purpose of community facilitation is to ensure that students and their families truly have school choice.

The long-term effect will be a movement of students towards those schools that meet the broad demands inherent in the concept of *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999). As a result, those institutions that fail to provide both quality academics and a comfortable space where students can develop their whole person will face decreased enrollment, and subsequently, diminished funding. Therefore, through the effective exercise of school choice, the system of school accountability will become one based not upon test scores, but upon the ability of schools to respond to the various needs of the community.

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