PARENTAL MULTI-MEANINGS OF SCHOOL CHOICE: A NARRATIVE,
PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

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PARENTAL MULTI-MEANINGS OF SCHOOL CHOICE: A NARRATIVE, PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative, phenomenological, case study was to develop a thick, rich description of the deeper meanings of school choice for parents at a Midwestern, mid-size suburban public middle school. Parental school choice was defined as the untold, multi-faceted understanding of values, beliefs, and the underlying personal preference regarding schools to discover meaning. The traditions of narratology, phenomenology, and case study were utilized to capture the voices of parents to understand the meaning of the phenomenon. The goal of this research was to share this information with school district leaders as it could, (a) help identify why parents are making school choice decisions, (b) identify resources parents utilized to make choice decisions, and (c) to understand the attributes parents were looking for in a school and why they specifically chose this particular district/school. In
knowing this information school district leaders could use this knowledge to market their
district and use the data to inform policy and practices.

For the survey and narratives, data were analyzed using the process of a generic
coding process that constituted identifying themes and subthemes. Transcendental
phenomenology and cross-case analysis were used to analyze interviews. Findings from the
surveys, narratives, and interviews themes suggested that the districts will want to gather
their own data on what choice means, keep a focus on continuous student achievement,
disseminate current school information to the public, and in particular develop positive
partnerships with real estate agents to ensure new parents are provided accurate information
about the school district. These findings revealed a real need for educational leaders to
manage district growth and keep a small town feel, while maintaining low teacher-student
ratios. The need to keep district and building-level websites current with data parents were
looking for, as well as for districts to consider inter-district and intra-district student transfer
opportunities also came to light. The experiences of the participants were from a privileged
background, but equity for all students is something for which we continue to strive.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education have examined a dissertation titled “Parental Multi-Meanings of School Choice: A Narrative, Phenomenological Case Study” presented by Lori Marie Mann, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Sitting at my parent’s kitchen table one day my father shared his prioritized hierarchy for what was important in life; I have internalized this structure as my own and will address acknowledgements in order of prominence; 1) God, 2) Family, and 3) Everything else.

I thank God for giving me the resources (time, money, talent, family, and friends) to persevere in achieving my goal; with Him all things are possible.

To Jeff, Liz, and Jarod, thank you for giving up time with me and taking on additional responsibilities so that I could study and work towards completing this dissertation. I love you beyond words.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Having grown-up in a rural, north central Kansas town there were only two choices for education: public or private. I had always known why my parents chose the specific private school I attended, and naively grew-up thinking all parents made conscious, meaningful choices of which school their child(ren) attended. Now that I am an adult, and in the field of education, my well-educated neighbors ask me questions about the public school their children attend; I am quite surprised regarding the lack of knowledge they have about the school. I wonder, did they move into our subdivision because of the schools their children would be attending, was it because the developer would allow people to bring in their own builder, was it because they liked the house, or some combination of these factors?

In my quest to understand what is known, concerning multiple meanings of parental meaning for school choice, I found no research documents on this topic, to date (Holme, 2002, Coldron & Boulton, 1996). However, there was research concerning criteria parents used for parent choice and what parents were looking for in schools of choice, but not meanings of parental choice. Holme (2002) researched the multiple criteria used by high-income parents for school choice selection. She discovered that most of the parents in her study did not know much about their chosen school’s instruction and programs before they selected the school and that “most parents stated that they based their judgments about the school quality primarily on information from individuals in their social networks” (p. 180). Coldron and Boulton (1996) affirmed in their research that discipline is an important aspect when parents judge the quality of the school. Vassallo (2000) shared that, “parents
participating in school choice programs overwhelmingly define educational excellence in
three terms: safety, discipline, and instructional quality” (p.5). Literature denoted that
middle-class parents, who yearned to “provide their children with a high quality education is
a common trigger for middle-class relocation, as parents seek to avoid urban public school
systems that frequently suffer from inadequate resources, low-achievement rates, and
unfavorable reputations” (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012; Bayoh, Irwin, & Haab, 2006;
Holme, 2002; and Lauen, 2007). What happens when the school of choice is a public
school? What meaning does school choice have for parents choosing public schools? This
study enlightened and provided data on the meanings of school choice, which were not
available, and findings educated and extended educators perspective on the meanings of
school choice and resources utilized for choice decisions; the power of insightful data had the
potential to impact school policy and practices. In a perfect world, my long-term goal would
be for every parent to have the opportunity to make school choice decisions for their
child(ren) and to rid our country of the educational disparities that exist. Next, I shared my
story as a parent participating in school choice.

As a parent in a family where we made conscious decisions about where our children
attended school, this search for understanding is analogous to an unquenchable thirst. Both of
the schools my children have attended have been purposefully and meaningfully chosen.
First my children attended a private school that was affiliated with our church. Taking our
family norms into account it seemed logical to send our children to receive a solid education
that embedded religion and church doctrine. When our daughter was no longer academically
challenged we transferred our children to a public school where I had been a teacher. I knew
the climate, culture, and academic expectations the children would be required to aspire to,
most importantly it had a gifted program; my daughter tested and was accepted. Our previous school did not have a gifted program, thus the need for a new school to meet our children’s needs; this meant our daughter could continue at a pace and depth of knowledge for which she was ready and we felt our son would flourish at this school as well.

As I reflected on my own family’s experiences with school choice and the selection of a school with a gifted education program, I must acknowledge that there was, and continues to be, a crisis in U.S. schools. It has been documented that gifted programs mostly served students who are white, middle class, and easily identifiable by standardized tests (Frank, 2010; Fraiser, et al., 1995; Karnes, 2003). Gifted African American, Hispanic, Latino/a, and Native American students, mostly males, are underrepresented (Grantham, 2011; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ford & Scott, 2010; Hargrove & Seay, 2011; Gentry & Fugate, 2012). Asian American students were the more highly represented ethnic group in gifted education, as well as in advanced courses (Oh & Callahan, 2013). I fully realized my subdivision neighbors and I approached school choice from a ‘privileged’ position. That is, for many parents in the United States living in urban or rural areas, without sufficient family income, lack of other options, and the ability to move, the public school is the only choice. Even charter schools in urban areas may be unavailable if parents cannot provide transportation for their child(ren). Tim Wise (2005) wrote in White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son:

Even when we [White people] enjoy a real and abiding closeness to people of color, that closeness will be complicated by our relationship to the larger institutional structures within which we find ourselves; it will be rendered at best a mixed bag, simply because of our ability to enjoy privilege, and even extend privilege, on the backs of others, no matter how much we may genuinely love and respect those others. (p. 102)
My family was fortunate to have the means to make educational choice decisions for our children, and I am aware of the privileged status that we enjoyed based upon our white skin and economic advantages. Our school choice necessitated moving so we were within a specified attendance area. I share this, because as a parent there are multiple factors that influence my decisions for school choice, but unless sought, would never be known.

Where were students attending school? The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) captured trend data, as shown in Table 1, concerning where students were attending school.

Table 1

*Percentage Distribution of Students in Grades 1-12, by Type of School: 1993, 2003, and 2007*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public, assigned</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public, chosen</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, church-related</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private, not church-related</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data for 1993 and 2003 include homeschooled students enrolled in public or private schools for 9 or more hours per week. Data for 2007 exclude all homeschoolers. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

As noted in Table 1, there was a decline in parents sending their child(ren) to the assigned public school thus creating an increased trend for parent selection of school choices. Both private church related and non-church related schools also had an increased rate for being
designated as schools of choice. In 2007, over 1.5 million students were home schooled in the United States and 2% of parents chose a charter school for their child(ren) (NCES, 2010). Homeschooled children were mostly enrolled full time. Many reasons were given as to why parents homeschooled their children, however the most common reasons given were the desire to provide religious or moral instruction, concern about the school environment (safety, drugs, negative peer pressure), dissatisfaction with academic instruction, along with a multitude of “other reasons” (NCES, 2009). While these statistics were valuable and demonstrate parental choices being made, they do not capture the public school underlying meanings of choice, which was the premise of this research, as there are reasons given that parents chose not to send their child(ren) to public schools versus what influenced them to choose a particular public school.

Who was choosing which type of school has been documented by the National Center for Educational statistics (2010):

In 2007, there were enrollment differences in the types of schools attended across demographic groups. For example, a higher percentage of black students (24 percent) than white students (13 percent) were enrolled in chosen public schools, and a higher percentage of non-poor students (4 percent) than poor or near-poor students (1 percent) enrolled in nonsectarian private schools. (p. iv)

Differences in parental choice were noted by family structure and poverty status. Higher percentages of children from poor families attended public schools than attended private schools. As reported by Schuettle (1971), for the children of the poor, the likely prospect [of being able to move away from a less than optimal educational district/school] is not due to high social economic status, but unemployment, low wages, poor housing and offspring whose prospects are similarly bleak (p. 1357). A high percentage of private school students
A greater percentage of students from one-parent families attended chosen public schools than did students from two-parent families (18 vs. 14 percent, respectively). A greater percentage of students living in cities (23 percent) attended chosen public schools than did students living in the suburbs, towns, or rural locales (12 percent, each). A greater percentage of students in the West attended chosen public schools (20 percent) than did students in the Midwest (15 percent), South (14 percent) or Northeast (13 percent). (p. 9)

While we have statistics for school choice, minimal information was known concerning the meaning school choice had for building and district administrative leaders and policymakers which impacted future parents, policies, and procedures. In research conducted by Holme (2002) “most parents stated that they based their judgments about the school quality primarily on information from individuals in their social networks” (p. 180). Parental meaning of choice, whether developed from research conducted by parents or from networking, communicated value, based on the schools or district, and swayed parents to or away from specific school districts. Capturing parental meaning provided invaluable information that parents perceived as important; significant enough to persuade those who could to move within a specified attendance area. District leaders not only looked at academic test scores, attendance, and other indicators identified for districts to meet annual yearly performance (AYP) but also utilized the information when creating marketing materials, sharing data on district or school websites, and marketing to others based on information that “sells” their district to perspective and current parents. Ideas can become
policy and then practices. According to Black (1999), “economists, educators, and policy makers, too, have long been interested in the value of better schools in order to assess a number of school reforms” (p. 577). Parents wanted the best school they could afford for their child(ren) and policymakers and economists wanted skilled an educated workforce to propel the United States as a leader amongst other nations. Thus, there was value in this research for both practitioners and policymakers.

This research was personal, as an aspiring central office administrator, parental choice meaning would spotlight how choices were being made, what factors or resources were impacting choice, and it highlighted the suppliers of information. In an effort to best reach current and future parents, defining parental choice enlarged my understanding of what we were doing well and practices upon which we may need to re-examine or look further into. It was at this juncture that I felt compelled to share that I am not pro-religious or pro-public in regard to choices, as you have read, my own children have attended private school and now are enrolled in public schools. What I did feel strongly about was ensuring equity of educational quality and opportunities for all students; where they attended was not the issue, understanding the meaning behind why they chose a particular school had lasting ripple-effect notions that could help all students. A public school education that provides all students full participation in a democratic society is worth fighting for (Nieto & Bode, 2012); an intellectual, stimulating education that challenged each child to achieve at or beyond his/her potential was worth fighting for. This brought us full circle back to parents who were choosing a district, or a particular school, and the meanings of their child(ren) receiving an education from a particular institution. I believe we had much to learn from our consumers. It was hoped that by illuminating participants’ deep meanings of school choice, districts and
policymakers could use the information to grasp what was making schools attractive to parents and perhaps change social policies, as well as contribute to scholarly research on meanings of parental choice.

The Problem

Historically education sought to understand parental school choice, from the framework of public versus private school, intra-school or inter-district choice, and homeschooling using a quantitative method (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Convey, 1986; Darling-Hammond & Krify, 1988; Williams, Hancher, & Hutner, 1978; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Schneider, Teske, Marshall, & Roch, 1998; and Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008) to collect statistical data to quantify pre-determined survey categories. School choice was defined as parents who selected the school, public or private, that they explicitly desired their child(ren) to attend. The problem was that there was limited knowledge and awareness of multiple meanings concerning parental criteria and other factors for school choice. Without hearing from stakeholders why they had chosen a particular school, how does public education know the complexity of this decision; what parents valued about their schools, channels of communication upon which parents made decisions, and what, if any resources were utilized? How did parents make sense of their world, assigning meaning and ultimately making educational choices based on knowledge? What knowledge were they relying upon? If you believe that our education system was, to a significant degree, about satisfying those it served and those who paid for it through their tax dollars, we should give weight to the desire of parents to choose their children’s schools and to the satisfaction that is generated by allowing them to do so (Garcia, 2013).
School choice has also been viewed as a political issue, with school vouchers providing parents money to fund their choice school, or the wealthy using personal funds to acquire the education they choose for their child(ren). According to Smith (2005), “there is a deep divide between those who see market-driven education reforms as a means to achieve the goals of public education and those who see these reforms as a threat to the very ethos of public schooling” (p. 285). Opponents of vouchers or school tax credits that support student’s attendance at a religious private school cited and disapproved of the entanglement of church and state.

“Few researchers to date have sought to correct one of the central flaws identified in existing research: specifically, none has critically examined the content or the multiple meanings of parental criteria for choice” (Holme, 2002, p. 182). There was a lack of research and qualitative, rich dialogue with parents to gain knowledge and understand their meanings of school choice, which had implications for education. Moreover, Wilkins (2010) stated, “we should consider instead therefore how behavior and orientations geared towards the preservation of ideas around community integration and support constitute an active, responsible engagement with the meaning and practice of choice” (p. 11). Finally, Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball (1994) shared, “there is little attempt to consider how parents and/or children ‘make choice’, and whether they are actually involved in the process that could be correctly characterized as choice making” (p. 76). This shortage of research on meanings of parental school choice heightened the need for this dissertation study.

Therefore, there was a gap in the research. I have found only one study (Holme, 2002) out of 33 that mentioned the need to examine the multi-meanings, or layers of definitions and decisions, with regard to parents making educational placement
determinations, no other study had mentioned this phenomenon. Holme’s (2002) qualitative research sought to interview parents who used their financial resources to buy a home in what they believed was the best school district they could afford (p. 179). The study found that “most of the parents in this study did not know a great deal about their chosen school’s instruction and programs prior to making their choice” (p.179). I wondered if the parents in Holme’s study could have represented some of my neighbor’s rationales for choice. I must profess I do not live in a subdivision comprised of homes valued at $500,000, rather the subdivision is modest, with many dual working families whom some have custom built their own homes and have some financial means, a parallel to Holme’s (2002) research.

The residential relocation of white households from inner-city neighborhoods to suburban communities is a phenomenon that had been occurring for some time (Fey, 1979; Rossell, 1975). A concern about white flight was that it increased segregation and undermined desegregation efforts made by many communities. White flight referred to white households relocating their residences from inner-city neighborhoods to suburban communities. Author of the U.S. Office of Education, James C. Colemen, took the position that urban school desegregation hastened “white flight” (Green & Pettigrew, 1976).

“Evidence has tended to confirm that the cumulative redistributing of white residences and jobs out of the urban center has led to a lower quality of life for the minorities and poor left stranded in the core” (Frey, 1979, p. 425). What was voiced and felt by people who, for many different reasons, stayed in the urban district is not known. One may think that there was a simple and direct relationship between racial discrimination and racial residential segregation, but there was not (Gotham, 2002). There was a second type of “white flight” in which white students were transferred to private schools or parochial schools; a “flight”
without relocation. Research on “white flight” in Kansas City conducted by Gotham (2002) reported:

FHA-subsidized housing, stable neighborhoods, and quality schools pulled Whites to the suburbs while profiteering real estate activity and decisions of the Kansas City Missouri School District to abandon its schools to the expanding black community pushed whites out of the city. (p. 118)

Collecting parent perspectives from open-ended surveys, narratives, and interviews provided a broad and substantive understanding of how individual’s lived experiences led to decisions made concerning school choice for their children.

Though my study sought the meanings choice held for parents, in Holme’s (2002) research she found among choosers there was no deep level of meaning sought. However, Holme’s (2002) study did indicate, “choices are fundamentally a struggle for status and distinction, a means by which privileged parents seek out high-status institutions that will confer both material and social advantages on their children” (p. 202). Lack of data concerning multiple meanings for understanding parental choice affects school leadership, school boards, educational policy makers, and real estate agents; an important economic consideration. The lack of data inhibited schools from learning the multifaceted meanings for why their school was chosen and the ability to make data-based decisions to support learning for all students; adding, eliminating, or improving programs and practices. The school improvement, also referred to as school reform process, was a learning, complex process. “The key to success is to get good data from all parts of the system on a continuous basis, studied and worked out at the school/district level, and subsequently at the central office level” (Hopkins, 2012, p. 9). This sounds simplistic, however in reality is complex. O’Day (2002) reminded us that “adaptation in schools is inhibited by incentive and resource
structures that undermine motivation and the opportunity for organizational learning or that preclude the adoption of more productive strategies” (p. 10).

From past experiences as both a teacher and an administrator some of those resources could be lack of sufficient time to collaborate, grade and provide substantive feedback to promote student growth, insufficient resources for teaching, and systems that are okay with mediocrity. Schools have shifted from a bureaucratic form of organization to that of schools as communities; much may be attributed to Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s), which began in 1997. PLC was a school improvement process that “attempted to develop organizations predicated on a set of shared values and norms, personal mastery, critical reflections, and collaboration” (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999, p. 134). PLCs involved infrastructure changes that ultimately lead to continuous school improvement (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013). Parents and community participation and input were a piece of school improvement. Hopkins (2001) reminded us that parents and community were “essential for the development and maintenance of primary schools in rural areas” (p. 10).

Data garnered through this research provided the district, and school, with parental meanings of school choice and resources parents used to make decisions that could impact school and district improvement efforts. Currently there was limited research on the topic and limited requests to seek parental criteria and its’ deeper meaning for choosing a particular school or district. Ball and Vincent (1998) discussed, “this kind of data [quantitative] research with its reliance on checklists and criteria tends to treat all kinds of knowledge as equivalent and simply as more or less important to different individuals” (p. 394).

A variety of social dimensions must be considered as they influence parents’ reasons for exercising school choice (Goldring & Phillips, 2008, p. 20). At minimum, analysis
showed that relying simply on survey data to find out how parents exercised their expanding rights to choose led to an overly optimistic view of what will motivate their actual choices (Schneider & Buckley, 2002, p.142). Only one research study, to date, (Holme, 2002) has identified the need to examine the deeper, multi-meanings of parental school choice. As cited, extensive data existed that quantifies the criteria parents used to select their school of choice, but few have attempted to understand the phenomenon at a deeper level. The central argument was that, amid multiple and sometimes conflicting definitions of “democracy”, progressive reforms should not assume that their interpretations of democratic education are the only—or even the more enduring-understandings (Kimelberg & Billingham, 2012, p. 34).

Focused attention on the underlying values, beliefs, and reasons that parents selected a specific school, allowed educational administrators, school boards, and policy makers to adjust educational and social practices or policies to better meet the needs of all students and parents. Additionally, Holme (2002) stated, “if policy makers intend to grant children of low-income parents access to some approximation of the educational opportunities that children of privileged parents have, it is important to know what types of schools these parents seek, and why” (p. 179). This study was purposefully only studying the meaning of school choice from parents who have had children in a particular public school district for at least a year, and their meaning of choice and resources utilized to make informed decisions that impact their children for a lifetime.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the deeper multi-meanings of school choice for approximately four to ten parents, of four to five students, whose children attended a Midwestern, mid-size suburban public middle school. The unit of analysis was parents’
meaning of public school choice. At this stage in the research the multi-meanings of parental choice were generally defined as the untold, multi-faceted understandings of values, beliefs, and underlying personal preference of school or district to discover meaning.

Narrative, phenomenology, and case study were the theoretical traditions utilized. Narratology, or narrative analysis, extended the idea of text to include in-depth interviews, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction (Patton, 2002, p. 115). Since narrative stories occurred within specific places or situations, it seemed logical and reasonable to capture parent’s account of their lived experiences that helped us visualize and understand the deeper meanings of school choice and make them known. Narrative research was best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). Phenomenology sought to understand the essence of meanings from our lived experiences; understanding parents’ meanings of school choice informed this study. In phenomenology any phenomenon can be a starting point, thus seeking the phenomenon of parental choice is valid, “the challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49).

Case study was the dominant qualitative tradition. Case study was the analysis of the particularity and complexity of a single case, and coming to understand its activity within important circumstances (Patton, 2002, p. 297). A hallmark of a good quality case study was that it represented an in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2002, p. 98). This enquiry was a single case study with each participant viewed individually with themes, patterns, and differences analyzed for obtaining participant perspectives and understandings concerning parental choice. Discerning significant, deep meanings for why parents choose a particular
school district, and a specific middle school within that district, was sought in this study, thus the case study approach provided the information for which this examination intended to learn.

**Research Questions**

This study focused on two central research questions that were intended to guide the investigation in a way to gain the most useful knowledge on the multi-meanings of parental school choice from as diverse a group as possible of parents that met the criteria. These parents have intentionally chosen the district their child(ren) attend, have been in the district for at least a year, and have children enrolled in a specific middle school. The following five sub-questions seek to gain a deeper understanding of parent’s multiple meanings of school choice.

**Central Question One:** What were the meanings of school choice for parents?

Sub-questions:

1. How did parents define school choice?
2. What experiences did parents attribute to their meanings of school choice?
3. How did parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children?

**Central Question Two:** What resources did parents use to develop meanings about school choice?

Sub-questions:

1. What resources do parents ascribe to, to construct their meanings of school choice?
2. To what social and economic resources do parents ascribe to conduct their meanings of school choice?
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework, as defined by Maxwell (2013), referred to “the actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied” (p. 39). Bell (2005) defined theoretical framework as, “…an explanatory device which explains either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied, the key factors, constructs or variables, and the presumed relationships among them” (p. 103). Concepts in the theoretical framework informed and supported the research. My personal experience with parental choice had given me a limited understanding of the phenomenon but also invigorated my curiosity as to what meanings choice represented for other parents.

Little was known about the phenomenon, or essences of the meaning, of parental school choice. Thus the problem was limited research, knowledge, and awareness of the deep, underlying, multiple reasons for parental school choice. There were infinite stories of the many meanings of parent choice, such as my own family’s story. These stories needed to be captured, investigated and described in qualitative research; this was missing in our current knowledge base. Thus the purpose for this study was to understand the deeper, multi-meanings of school choice for parents at a Midwestern, mid-size suburban public middle school. As a parent who purposefully selected specific schools for my own children, based on values that were meaningful for our family, I brought several assumptions to this qualitative study. First, the multiple meanings of parental school choice were generated and influenced by various sources such as parental stories, embedded family traditions, perceived school/community values, race, availability of specialized programs, (for example English Language Learner, special needs, migrant, reading, gifted education, etc.) as well as socio-economic status. Second, school and community values were mere perceptions based on
parents’ viewpoints; these may or may not be reality. Finally, parents who choose the school their child attends were happier and therefore also more involved with their child’s school. According to Bast and Walberg’s (2004) research the “consensus results show that parents are more satisfied with choice, that they report using academic preferences to make choices, and that they tend to be more involved with their child’s education as a consequence of choice” (p. 438).

Based on my experiences, I expect parent meanings to be unique, but also to find some common themes. If we could understand common meanings school choice has for parents we may be able to positively alter and provide school information that parents seek-out and find useful. The ultimate goal would be to use the qualitative phenomenon data to alter school initiatives and enact school policy in an effort to better engage all parents in supporting their children’s educational success. The literature review examined below will be expanded in Chapter 2.

The first concept strand of the theoretical framework addressed the history of public school education. Without an understanding of United States public school history it would be difficult to understand when and how school choice began and correctly place assumptions and ideas in the 21st century in context with historical events. The second concept strand pertains to parent choice. If we could understand factors that parents were looking for when choosing their choice schools, and in this study, there would be substantial documentation to share with others that would help better inform schools on topics of interest to parents and likewise would be rich data for a district to use. The third conceptual strand was the benefit of engaged parents. Parents of school choice tended to be more involved in their child(ren)’s education, perhaps because they believed and become vested in the school
they chose. The fourth conceptual strand was cultural diversity. Unfortunately, in the United States all students were not achieving in our schools, nor does the quantitative data demonstrate that all students were being treated fairly, with dignity and respect. At times parents were choosing to segregate themselves, thus diversifying, rather than integrating students from various races, ethnicities, languages, and genders. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology provided a lens to view the study and why certain approaches were taken in this study. Phenomenology asked for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is- and without which it could not be what it is (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Historical Context of Public Schools in the United States

Historically, the concept of education was a family matter and parents who could, tutored their child(ren) in the home or hired a tutor (Jeynes, 2007). “The effectiveness of home schooling varied depending particularly upon religion and gender; literacy was much higher in the North than the South and for males than for females” (Carper, 1992, p. 254). The middle and upper class parents gradually created schools where fees were paid; in response charity schools were organized which provided a rudimentary education for students whose parents could not afford to pay fees. “In the early 1950s, the weakened and disorganized progressive education movement became the target of choice for those troubled by what they saw as the lack of US educational preparedness in the face of the so-call Soviet threat [Sputnik]” (Engel, 2000, p. 23). During 1936, in the New England area, religious town governments started the voluntary establishment of Latin Schools to prepare boys for college (Cubberley, 1919, p. 16), for example, Harvard University. Between 1942 and 1963 the
leaders in the Puritan Church appealed to the state to request assistance in compelling parents and masters to observe that education was occurring in the home. Massachusetts Law of 1642 was a result of this appeal. Massachusetts Law of 1642 gave permission to town officials to ascertain, periodically, if parents and masters were attending to their educational duties. The duties were reported as: 1) If all children were being trained in learning and labor and other employments profitable to the Commonwealth, and 2) If children were being taught to read and understand the principles of religious and the capital laws of the country (Cubberley, 1919). Fines were levied if failure to educate children or report to the officer when required. Provisions to education students were left to the home for five more years until Massachusetts Law 1647. The right of states to require communities to establish and maintain schools began with Massachusetts Law 1647. According to Cubberley (1919) Massachusetts Law 1647 ordered:

1) Every town with 50 householders should at once appoint a teacher of reading and writing and provide for his wages, and 2) Every town having 100 householders must provide a Latin grammar school to fit youths for the university. Students were required to attend elementary public school, which was first through eighth grade with high school being optional. Colonial attitudes toward education in Virginia was that “tutors and private schools were for those who could afford them, and the church charity schools were for the very poor who received apprenticeship and training in some useful trade. (p 18)

Other colonies followed Virginia’s example with the English charity school idea. The most well-known charity school was called The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, chartered in 1701. Charity schools were seen as an auxiliary of the Church of England and their purpose was to “…train children in the tenets and worship of the church through direct agency of schools” (Cubberley, p. 23). In reading the history of the education in the United States these charity schools resembled the nearest approach to a free education
as we know it today. It was not until 1705 that Virginia Legislation required the “compulsory apprenticeship of the children of the poor, training in a trade, the requirement that the public authorities must provide opportunities for this type of education, with the use of local and colony funds” (Cubberley, 1919, p. 22).

Citizens of the United States lived in an agrarian society where schools operated when the children were not needed on the farms. The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1850, and resulting urbanization profoundly changed families and education; people moved from the countryside to work in the factories. At this time in the United States enslaved African Americans were not formerly educated. After the Civil War, (1865) and the emancipation of enslaved African Americans, African-American students were educated in separate facilities. In 1869 vouchers were initially made available, first to students who lived in a town without a public school and they could be used to attend a public or private school. By 1890 approximately “86% of children, ages 5-14, were enrolled in public elementary schools, while private schools accounted for 11%” (Carper, 1992, p. 254) and better than 75% of American children attended schools in rural areas” (Carper, 1992, p. 255). Surprisingly, during the racially divided nineteenth century, racially segregated neighborhoods were the exception rather than the rule in United States cities, despite White prejudice and hostility toward people of color (Gotham, 2002). But something happened that devalued those who were not White. In 1932 the Federal Home Loan Bank Act (FHLB) and the Home Owners’ Loan Act in 1933 were established as a federal effort to rebuild the nation’s housing and lending industries (Gotham, 2002). The Home Owner’s Loan Act started the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) which would assign a one to four rating to every block in the
United States to assess creditworthiness of the housing. According to Gotham (2002) the highest ratings/grades were given to:

New, racially homogeneous, all-white neighborhoods, a second grade to outlying Jewish and White work-class neighborhoods, and a third grade to racially mixed neighborhoods. The agency gave the lowest appraisal value to all-black neighborhoods regardless of the age of the dwellings or the income of the residents. (p. 53)

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) manual provided guidelines that required builders, real estate firms, and lenders to adopt specific and-useful tools and discriminatory subdivision regulations to protect property values and safeguard real estate investments.

From 1899 to May 17, 1954, separate schools for blacks and whites were legally maintained, as well as separate schools for ‘brown’ students, those students of Mexican and Latino/a descent in the Southwestern United States.

**Cultural Diversity and Parent School Choice**

The ideals of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” found in the United States Declaration of Independence, also run deep in our autonomous society that prided itself on school choice, individualism, and competition. In reviewing reasons for parental choice of schools it was evident that parents value academic quality, but they held varied ideals that influence choice. In short, there is remarkable consistency in the verbal reports of parents about what they value in schools—when asked parents say that their choice of schools is motivated by academic quality (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Tedin & Weiher, 2004; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Quantitative research revealed parents quantify different reasons for school choice, but none of them researched or discussed the qualitatively multiple meanings of school choice. According to Schneider and Buckley (2002), “ in short, research based on
surveys tend to find that parents of all races and social classes say they prefer schools that have good teachers and high test scores” (p. 136). Teske and Schneider (2001), stated, “researchers agree almost completely on at least one outcome: Parents who choose, report being more satisfied with the school than those who do not choose” (p. 615). A study conducted by Jolly, Matthews, and Nester, (2012) concerning gifted students who left public education to be homeschool stated, “It is important to learn more about parents’ perceptions because these perceptions can have a reciprocal influence on the special instructional programming students receive in schools” (p. 131). This study supported the notion that more needs to be understood about meanings and perceptions of school choice as important data consideration for district and school programming, policy analysis, and to further develop scholarly literature from which to build upon and help influence school decision making.

**Benefits of Engaged Parents**

The parent choice theory stated that when parents chose the school their child attended they were more likely to become involved with the school and conversely schools could and did influence the level of parent participation in their children’s education (Feuerstein, 2000). Research on parent involvement demonstrated that students specifically benefit when parents were involved with their schools. “If increased parental satisfaction has a net positive effect on children, perhaps by making parents more eager to work constructively with schools, then the act of families choosing schools might be inherently beneficial to students” (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011, p. 46). Additionally, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (1995), parents who chose schools were more likely than parents who did not to be satisfied with the school their children attended.
As a previous private school parent, I have seen first-hand the dedication of parents to not only pay for their child’s education, but also contribute time and talents in schools to assist teachers and students in being successful. It was not only a financial sacrifice but a labor of love and commitment that acknowledged the value placed upon a quality education. Vassallo (2000) found that parents of children in choice programs have been found to be more involved with their children’s academic programs and extracurricular activities than are other groups of parents with whom they have been compared. As a parent practicing school choice I was committed to assisting my children and their public school in achieving success, mostly because I had a vested interest in the intellectual, social, and character development of my children’s success. Success did not just happen; it required attention to details, focus, and commitment on student, teachers, administrators, parents and community to educate our youth. The old saying, “it takes a village to raise a child” is one I whole heartedly believed in, and perhaps why people more alike, than different, are found clustered in certain districts, schools, programs, and subdivisions. It was also the sad realization that varied parental income does not afford every parent the same access to become engaged in school choice opportunities; a quality educational program could be a great equalizer in the United States, unfortunately not all students were in classrooms with high quality teachers, needed resources, or school support in any locale; rural, suburban, or urban.

The Plowden Report, which appeared in 1967, stressed the importance of parent support to the child in school (Dimmock & O’Donoghue, 1996, p. 6). Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) grew out of this to address cooperation between home and school. Educators have found parental involvement in their children's education was a predictor of academic success (Gardner & Miranda, 2001, p. 258). Parents should not wait to be asked to
be involved in their child’s school, instead reverse the roles and ask, as parents, what you
could be doing to support the teacher in the classroom. According to research by Greenman,
Bodovski, and Reed (2011):

Parental practices and parental involvement in children’s educational careers have
been found to positively affect various dimensions of school success, such as
improved homework and study habits, better attitudes toward school, and lower
absenteeism and dropping out. (Hanson et al., 1997; Lareau, 2000; Lareau, 2003;
Muller, 1995; Portes, 1995; Ream & Palardy, 2008; & Stevenson & Baker, 1987,
p. 434)

Family-school connections in rural educational settings found that it was a multi-dimensional
construct with multiple pathways from which families participated in to support their child’s
learning at home, school, and through communications. In an empirical study by Kelly
(2009) conducted from 1995-2010, the researcher reviewed research literature from the last
15 years that were related to family-school partnerships and/or family or parental educational
involvement in rural settings. The author coded each article on variables identified as
important to rural educational research, based on previous reviews (Kelly, 2012, p. 27).
Eighteen studies met specific criteria and were included in the review. The samples studied
were all from schools in North America and Canada. There were a number of different study
designs: (a) ten were descriptive, (b) three were causal-comparative, (c) two were quasi-
experimental, (d) one was experimental, (e) one was qualitative, and (f ) one study used
multiple research methods. Several findings came from this research. Keith et al., (1996)
found that parental involvement had the same magnitude of influence on student achievement
in rural, urban, and suburban schools (p. 62). Another finding reported that rural parents
talked less frequently about school with their child(ren), attended school meetings less often,
attended more school events, but did not limit television viewing (Kelly, 2012). Lastly, rural
teachers reported that the most significant barrier to family involvement was parent’s lack of
time. A limitation found in this study cited a lack of definition of “rural.” Additionally, this
study used a rural audience and did not seek to understand a rural phenomenon. Another
limitation of this study is the small sample size with multiple methodologies, designs, and
goals. Although there were limitations to the various research projects, they have continued
to add to the body of knowledge regarding school choice.

Other studies found positive research. Brody, Stoneman and Flor (1995) learned that,
“maternal involvement with the children’s school, family processes, and family financial
resources were linked directly with academic competence and mediated by the development
of youth regulation” (p. 567). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005) also reported, “There has
emerged a strong conclusion that parental involvement in child and adolescent education
generally benefits children’s learning and school success” (p. 3).

**Philosophy of Phenomenology**

Edmund Hussell (1859-1938) crafted phenomenology; phenomenology tried to
comprehend the existence and experiences of a phenomenon with individuals who had a
common experience, thus the philosophy of phenomenology is a good match for trying to
understand parents’ meaning of school choice. The prime task of phenomenology was to
describe this everyday experience of the ‘life world’: the world as given in immediate
experience and independent of and prior to any scientific or other interpretation. According to
Edie (1964b), “a transcendental philosophy is always a metaphysics of experience in the
sense that it means to go beyond and beneath the ordinary, common-sense, taken-for-granted
evidences of daily life and natural thought to the foundations of these evidences” (p. 53). It
was true to say that phenomenology was not a description of the "real world," but it was a
description of the experience of the perceived world as the primary reality (Edie, 1964a,

    Phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in
    such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview.
    There is no separate reality for people. There is only what they know their experience
    is and means. (p. 106)

Understanding what people experienced concerning school choice, and how they interpreted
their world for meaning, was the approach and philosophy of phenomenology. According to
Duke (1984), “the researcher must allow the subjects to speak, in their own way and their
own time, about those aspects of the experience in question that seem relevant to them”
(p. 200). Understanding the philosophy behind phenomenology was foundational for my
study and all information gathered will be reported in my data collection methods and
findings section.

    Significance of the Study

    The significance of this study was to conduct scholarly research to understand the
complex, deeper meanings of why parents chose to send their child to a specific suburban
public middle school, within a particular school district; a topic on which there was limited
research and thus could make contributions to practice, social change, and policy. School
district leadership, school boards, and educational policy makers would be interested in the
study to guide strategic learning and community capacity building. Most scholarly work
pertaining to school choice focused on quantitative studies (Bridge & Blackman, 1978;
Convey, 1986; Darling-Hammond & Kriby, 1988; Williams et al., 1978; Schneider &
Buckley, 2002; Schneider et al., 1998; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008) that requested reasons parents chose a particular school (Hsieh & Shen, 2010; Bast & Walberg, 2004), but very few have researched at a deeper level, the meanings tied to topical categories for school choice (Holme, 2002). Through capturing parent’s complex, multi-meanings of school choice, stories generated a practical understanding that could inform and alter current practices in United States public school systems while building a body of knowledge.

Two strands of educational research on understanding multi-meanings for parent school choice have emerged; one focusing on parents’ choice of the school the child will attend and students performing at higher academic levels in schools of choice. Empirical data from small school choice experiments persuaded people with open minds that parents could indeed choose schools wisely, but it could not establish a universal principal or theory that applied in all cases (Bast & Walberg, 2004). The research also noted that students in schools of choice were academically preparing at a more rigorous level and graduating at a higher rate (Fuller, 1996; Sheffield, 2012) and that parents choose the right school for their students (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Parents who enrolled students in their school of choice were more actively involved resulting in students academically performing at a high level (Chubb, 1988; Powers & Cookson, 1999; Viteritti, 1996). Consequently, parents were satisfied with their school of choice because they had exercised their right to choose (Beavis, 2004; Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Powers & Cookson, 1999; Sheffield, 2012). School district leaders, as well as educational policy makers should learn why parents deliberately chose this district for their children, what the multi-meanings were for parents to attend a particular district/school, and to listen to ideas presented on school choice and enact policy as a result of understanding parental multi-meanings. These factors that increased
parental involvement should also be of interest to school boards as they strategically plan and represent the constituents of their community.

Another strand of educational research on understanding multi-meanings of parental choice was that in investing this dissertation proposal it was difficult to find relevant literature. As previously stated and literature cited, much research on parent choice and free market schools were of a quantitative nature, providing statistical information on broad topics. There was a lack of qualitative research which captured the significance of why parents chose a particular school or district and what made the district more appealing as a place to educate one’s child over another district; only one study by Holme (2002) was found. Research did state who the consumers of school choice were most often and which free-market choice option they would generally choose (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Hsieh & Shen, 2010) but it did not identify the qualitative meanings for parents choosing the school or program (voucher, charter, religious, intradistrict, or interdistrict, home schooling) type. The primary stated motivation for school choice, in all types, was perceived academic quality (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Jacobs, 2011).

By grasping an in-depth understanding of the various reasons for parental selection of a particular school, researchers could confirm or deny outcomes that build upon existing rationale for parent choice. District administrators may initiate, discontinue, or enhance information shared with existing and potential parents concerning district programs, curriculum and instruction, or marketing materials due to study outcomes. Study findings may also be used by civic leaders and realtors to verify or disaffirm parental goals and pursuits of educational school choice. Education is a complex endeavor, it is time we begin to understand the many reasons why parents choose a particular school, while simultaneously
building a body of knowledge. This study added to the scholarly literature, in an area that was lacking depth concerning multi-meanings of parental school choice of a mid-western, mid-sized public middle school which can then be used by a myriad of interested parties to improve schools and more directly improve educational systems.

**Overview of Methodology**

Qualitative studies tend to examine small groups of people in great detail. Whitley and Crawford (2005) shared, “unlike quantitative research, which sets a premium on reducing data to easily comprehensible units (for example, averages) qualitative research consciously attempts to document the complexity and multiplicity of experience” (p.108). Marshall and Rossman (1999) said, “in qualitative inquiry initial curiosities for research often come from real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher’s direct experience, tacit theories, political commitments, interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests” (p. 25). The rationale for using qualitative research was to understand the stories and multiple meanings of parent choice, this fits a qualitative paradigm as it captured participants’ direct experiences and sought a depth of knowledge and essence of meaning that could not be transcribed and understood with numbers; personal inquiry was needed. This study also fits the emic qualitative paradigm as it related to describing a phenomenon based on participant’s perceptions. Participants were viewed as a single holistic case, one group within a single environment.

I elected to use a narrative phenomenology study informed through case study theory; with the purpose of describing and understanding meanings of school choice through
participants’ stories they shared. While interviews were the major data source, I also gathered participant feedback from an open-ended survey and parent narratives.

Case study was the major research technique that informed this inquiry. Case study research was defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). As the instrument of my inquiry, the case study approach helped illuminate the phenomenon resulting in a better understanding and depth of meaning. Narrative was a term used to describe a variety of ways humans perform the “telling of events” (Overcash, 2004, p. 15). The narrative tradition sought the personal, innate collection of participant’s thoughts and experiences. A prevailing conceptualization of narrative is that it was one of many modes of transforming knowing into telling (Sandelowski, 2007, p. 162).

Transcendental phenomenology tradition was chosen as it sought and described experiences and procured a fresh perspective on the phenomenon under study. Transcendental means “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). In this case study the participants were able to share and write descriptions of their experiences that created meaning for school choice; thus the transcendental phenomenology method, with the search for personal meaning and essences of the experience, seemed like the perfect tradition to include in this research design.

This case study took place in a Mid-western, mid-sized suburban middle school. This middle school was selected due to certain criteria; (a) A middle school within a particular district, where the district enrollment rate was expected to continue to grow through 2020; (b) mid-sized, between 500-610 students enrolled; (c) suburban public school district, where
many parents have the means to make a choice, therefore this middle school was most appropriate for this study; and (d) 1 of 2 middle schools in the district where parents actively could make a choice. The district has five elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and one career center.

The particular middle school site selected for this study predominately served White students, (89.10% in 2013 as reported by the state department), with a decreasing number of Black students (4.5% in 2013 as compared to 5.3% in 2011 as reported by the state department) and Hispanic students (5.00% in 2013 as compared to 5.5% in 2011 as reported by the state department) enrolled in the school. Indian students have plateaued with (.20% in 2011, .30% in 2012, and .20% in 2012 as reported by the state department) however Asian student enrollment has slightly increased over the years (.50% in 2011 and .80% in 2013 as reported by the state department). Students in this school attended sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. The three data sources which were collected and analyzed were surveys, interviews, and narratives. One way to confront heterogeneity was to use multiple methods to sample the population, here by minimizing the impact of heterogeneity caused by any one method.

Research was conducted in two phases. Phase One included the announcement of this research study, participants were informed of the study, participants completed a consent form to participate and answered a survey. Criterion sampling was utilized in Phase One of this research as it referred to the studying of cases that meet some predetermined criteria of importance (Patton, 2002; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The rationale for criterion sampling was to ensure all participants had experience with the phenomenon. Being intentional in my participant choices and seeking parents whose children represent as many cultures, languages, household incomes, and special programs would provide the richest data
upon which to analyze. In the Fall of 2013, a letter indicating research purpose and objective was mass distributed to all 6-8th grade parents, within the specific research site through their Communication Arts classes, letting them know I was seeking volunteers for this study who met the criteria. If interested in participating, parents completed the consent form as well as the participant survey (see Appendices A & B). Open-ended surveys contained questions that could be answered with more than a yes or no response (Janesick, 1999, p. 507). This open-ended survey served as both a sampling strategy and as a data source. It was the intent of the researcher to disseminate the research study request for specified participants and receive feedback over a two to three week window. After analyzing completed surveys, four to ten parent participants, representing 4-5 students, would be selected from the pool of interested parents who had experience with the phenomenon and are as diverse as possible in regard to: race, gender, involvement in special programs such as special education, gifted education, and English language learning, and the grade levels representative of their child(ren), and languages.

Phase Two was when selected parents participated in two interviews and completed a narrative. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), “the interviewer should be prepared to depart from the planned itinerary during the interview because digressions can be very productive as they follow the interviewee’s interest and knowledge” (p. 314). I interviewed people to find out those things I could not directly observe (Patton, 2002). By interviewing, or asking questions of the participants, I was able to enter the participants’ perspectives, gather their stories, and listen to the words they used to express their perspectives. Qualitative interviews placed an emphasis on listening and following the direction of the participant/informant (Law et al., 1998, p. 5). Triangulation of the open-
ended survey, interview, and narratives ensured a deep understanding of the phenomenon. In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). The outline for the sequence of what parents were asked to do included, in this order: 1) Complete voluntary consent form and open-ended survey; 2) Participate in two in-depth interviews that will occur individually with each parent at the school site, within a specified timeframe; and 3) Compose a narrative and email to researcher, if not provide a hard copy.

The data were analyzed according to the specific procedures of each tradition. In case study a generic coding analysis to identify themes and patterns for a single case, both within and cross-case analysis, was utilized. I developed descriptive and interpretive codes which allowed me to take vast amounts of data and group it to identify patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Narratology does not have a specific approach, rather there are several to choose from. Savin-Baden and Howell (2010) define narratology as, “…characterized by the analysis of texts through formalized structured categories” (p. 71). This study utilized descriptive and interpretive codes to identify patterns and themes. Transcendental phenomenology had specific steps that were adhered to: 1) Epoche, 2) Phenomenological reduction, 3) Imaginative variation, and 4) Synthesis. These processes allowed me to draw conclusion among the open-ended survey, narrative and interview coding.
Limitations of the Study

This research study had limitations, most notably I am chose to study one middle school in a suburban school district, therefore the study will not be representative of parents in urban or rural, and elementary or high school settings. As the instrument of my research, I tried to epoch my ideas. I looked freshly at what was before me, as well as tried to establish a working relationship with voluntary participants, who met the criteria as a method to reduce any influence on participants. As in all research, it took time to collect thick, rich data; I did my best within the parameters set forth by this study. Lastly, I was a novice researcher so there could be errors. I followed clearly established steps when conducting research and analyzing data, which helped to ensure accurate data, as well as member checking. A detailed analysis of limitations and ethical considerations, as well as basic ethical principles and guidelines concerning research with human subjects was included in Chapter 3. Consent forms to voluntarily participate in this study, as well as an Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent was obtained and no research was conducted until the IRB committee had approved the research proposal.

Conclusion

In summary, there was a gap in the research concerning the meaning of school choice and this dissertation sought to collect data that revealed the multi-meanings of school choice. Two central research questions directed this study that comprehended the existence and experiences of the phenomenon with suburban middle school parents who had chosen to participate in school choice. The researcher anticipated that this qualitative narratology, phenomenological, case study research would contribute to educational practice, social
change and policy. During the research there were limitations, specifically the research was conducted only in one Midwestern, suburban middle school and the researcher was a novice.

In Chapter 2, I provided a comprehensive discussion and awareness of research that related to the history of parental school choice, school choice options, benefits of engaged parents, and cultural diversity, all which served as the foundation for this study. Chapter 3 included an overview of methodology, rationale for qualitative research, the design of this study, and limitations and ethical considerations found in this study. Chapter 4 included data findings and analysis of the findings through, within, and across cases in response to each research question. This study concluded with Chapter 5, the researcher’s conclusions and recommendations. Now to Chapter 2 and the history of education and parental school choice.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental public school choice was a privilege in the United States, which benefited consumers who have the resources to choose a school for their child(ren), yet is a social ill for the poor and those without the financial, time, and mobility means to choose. The quality of a child’s education will directly affect the history and economy in the United States; parent choice of which school to send their son/daughter was extremely important. School choice was broadly defined as any policy that was designed to reduce the constraints that current school configurations placed on students and schools (Goldhaber, 1999). Americans can agree that schools need improvement, but there is heated debate concerning whether school choice could produce it. On the pro-choice side, it was argued that choice engaged students and parents by being motivated to help the school for your child’s success. Those who opposed school choice say that it further exacerbated the stratification of students by social class. An exceptional education is what I believe every parent wanted for his/her child, it is what I wanted for my children; choosing the right option for your child needs to be taken seriously and as educators the meanings of choice understood.

Today society provides choices for education but not everyone has equal access to equally rigorous educational choices. A theoretical review of international research (Kelly, 2009) demonstrated that research on school choice and local markets in education over the last 20 years is contradictory or inconclusive. Kelly’s research juxtaposes findings from the United Kingdom (UK), United States (US), and Europe and discusses theoretical implications. Choice programs in the United States were designed for low-income urban
families and popularity exceeded demand (Kelly, 2009). The UK discovered that already advantaged families were more likely to gain “slots” in the most desirable schools, so schools became socially polarized with the parents having the means to provide transportation to non-adjacent schools. Choice program became legal in the UK with the 1988 Education Reform Act, and to a lesser extent with the 1980 Education Reform Act which provided open enrollment in catchments. Schools in the Netherlands provided completely free choice of education as no catchment areas existed and both public and faith schools received equivalent funding from their government.

There was some evidence from Germany and France that suggested school choice was of greatest benefit to disadvantaged minority and working-class students (Kelly, 2012; Glen, 1989; Moynihan, 1989); and evidence from the United States that African American families favored school choice programs more than White or other race families as school choice provided social and economic opportunity for disadvantaged groups (Kelly, 2012). Some studies found that students living in the inner city, students of color, and students from poverty backgrounds do better through school choice schemes. Other research found that choice and competition do in some circumstances, increase social and racial segregation, especially students in inner city schools (Kelly, 2009). Ball (1993) commented, “The market solution, that choice will satisfy both individual families and the nation, seems little more than an act of faith” (p. 15). Those in favor of choice indicated that it offered a means of escaping poverty and generated opportunities for marginalizes families, creating better schools for everyone. Supporters also believed the competition forced the ineffective schools to close. Critics of choice, on the other hand believed that public schools contributed to the common good in a democratic society and suggested civic socialism was less effective in a
system of educational choice. Opponents also countered that choice harmed the underprivileged and that markets catered to specific needs, values, and interests of advantaged groups. According to Kelly (2009):

They [critics] further suggest that choice schools and parents act together to create a school system that reinforces existing social hierarchies and go on to argue that any possible benefit to individuals is outweighed by negative societal effects. Supporters counter that the only substantiated empirical research in this area finds that the parents of pupils in schools of choice are overwhelmingly satisfied with their performance which should count for something in the debate. (p. 97)

Research by Walsh (2012) found that, “school choice patterns reflect the fundamental differences that arise among ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups. Most importantly, this difference means that school choice has the potential to increase racial and economic segregation in America’s public schools” (p. 9).

Rational choice theory suggested that parents were fully aware of their options and acted rationally in knowing the needs of their children when they made schooling decisions. Research on those who exercised choice suggested that parents who are better educated are those who exercise choice, though some high achieving parents distance themselves from schools and low-achieving parents are reluctant to get involved with or even visit schools.

Choice of which public school to attend runs the gamut and “within choice options, the data indicates that trends in enrollment by race and income vary widely among states and even districts” (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008, p. 1). Hill (2005) stated that, “an original impetus for the choice movement was to empower poor families who cannot move to affluent suburban schools or pay private school tuition” (p. 10). Parental choice fits within scholarly literature as it reviewed parent rationale, both in favor and against school choice, and sought to understand the premise of the research and validate the outcomes of studies. Proponents of
public school parental choice said that with competition, choice will put pressure on schools to be efficient providers of education (Astin, 1992; Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000). They also argued that choice gave parents more control over their child(ren’s) education and that parents, when given the opportunity, would choose good schools for their children (Goldhaber, 1999). Since people differ in their definitions of a “good school” there was no consistency for how a parent evaluated a school as “good.” It was fair to say that “good” can vary not only with parents, but with educators as well. According to Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley (2008) parents who “support school choice do so for diverse reasons, but there is widespread agreement among them that the ultimate goal is improved student learning or outcomes” (p. 2). Critics of parent choice say that parents cannot be counted on to make sound educational choice based on criteria or values (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). More research into what factors parents were using to determine the quality of one school, as superior over another, needs to be researched and quantified. There was an assumption that if parents could choose the kind of school their child(ren) attended there would be greater parent and student satisfaction (Goldring & Shapira, 1993). School choice rested heavily on the parents’ perceived needs or values. It is not known if parental satisfaction of the school their child attended is a result of the placebo effect or based on variables due to direct teaching and learning.

Opponents to school choice believe:

Choice would result in a ‘creaming’ of the best students and teachers from traditional public schools, leading to further segregation of the school system by race and income and leaving the public schools a ‘dumping ground’ for disadvantaged students. This might serve to undermine one of the goals of the public schools: to bring children from different background together, teach them tolerance of one another, and provide them with common experiences. (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 17)
Studies already exist that validated that school choice was occurring by residential location (Goldhaber, 1999; Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2000). In America, what options for parent choice in the public school systems are there and what is the motivation for choice? A historical review of literature was needed to understand how schools of choice, (voucher, charter and magnet) evolved, what criteria was being utilized to demonstrate educational impact, and what the motivation for choice was. Education began with homeschooling and religious instruction, thus both are found within the context of the development of American public schools. No school choice option was kept from this study. Where parents chose to send their child(ren) to school was important. The literature review included critical information concerning the history of school choice options in the U.S., types of parental choice, the benefits of being an engaged parent with his/her child’s education, and cultural diversity in your school.

**Historical Context of Parent Choice Options in the United States**

Reviewing how parent school choice came to be may help us understand the various models of school choice. Parent choice was understood to mean parent’s ability to choose where to send their child(ren) to. Education first began in the home, though not titled “home schooling.” Missouri’s first compulsory attendance law was enacted in 1905, which indicated children ages 7-16 must attend school. The broad political and social movements aimed to free individuals from bureaucratic constraint and help ethnic and racial minorities end second-class citizenship were increasing segregation, even in light of all the efforts of desegregation. Segregation was the separation of people by race, ethnicity, or class. Desegregation was the opposite, meaning to integrate or mix people of different races,
ethnicities, and class. Cuban (1990) wrote, “if desegregation, compensatory education, and magnet schools became familiar phrases, so do free school, open classrooms, flexible scheduling and middle schools” (p. 4). In the large southern communities there was less residential segregation than in large northern communities. According to Lieberman (1966) “most large southern communities seeking to avoid desegregation do so by adopting freedom of choice plans; under these plans, pupils may elect to attend any school in the district which has space for them” (p. 483). In fact the origins of school choice in the United States could be traced back to Brown v. Board of Education, 1954. Brown brought a legal end to racial discrimination and segregation of schools within a dual society in the United States. Brown v. Board of Education meant that Blacks would be integrated into better schools with White children and there would be more social justice in our communities. The fight for social justice and equity may have been won in the courtroom, however those who opposed the ruling found other ways to discriminate and so ensued a political and societal battle. Some families relocated in the city, while there were also deliberate public policies such as zoning, busing routes, placement of new schools, and where to draw school boundary lines (Patterson, 2001). “In the 1950s and later blockbusting-induced racial succession became a wide-spread practice that affected entire city neighborhoods” (Gotham, 2002, p. 103) that fostered animosity between races. In the 1960s, women, people of color, and other excluded or marginalized social groups successfully organized to extend equal educational opportunity (Engel, 2000, p. 1). Their message was advanced by democratic educators and the progressive social movement; “over the past two hundred years they have offered the promise of encouraging and energizing young people to take control of their world and make it a better place” (Engel, 2000). These same reforms despise market ideology and its’ notion
of privatization and competition. They believed that “consensus is healthier than constant conflict and that a stable educational system that develops out of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise among a plurality of interests is far more beneficial for the nation” (Engel, 2000, p. 7).

Magnet and charter schools, as well as vouchers, initially spawned from the desegregation efforts. Milton Friedman, a conservative economist, formally proposed vouchers in the 1950s and 1960s; voucher proposals in their contemporary form gained currency in academic circles in the early 1970s (Ziegler & Lederman, 1991). A school voucher was a certificate, issued by the government that provided funds to parents to allow their child(ren) to attend a private school rather than to the public school in their attendance area. In 1986 the National Governor’s Association approved the goal of providing choice among public schools (Lee, 1993). During President Bush and President Reagan’s time in office, school choice was discussed at length in federal educational policy. There can be little doubt that without the resolve of Ronald Reagan, school choice as an educational reform would never have reached national prominence (Cookson, 1994, p. 6). In October, 1989, the U.S. held its’ first Education Summit where President Bush and 50 governors agreed on choice as a major item in the nation’s education policy agenda (Lee, 1993). Parental choice was federally mandated in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which “requires districts to allow parents or guardians of children in schools that repeatedly fail to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets to choose a non-failing public school in the same district” (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Hill, 2006). Accountability was a profound feature of NCLB. In order for a school to meet AYP requirements in a given year, students in the school must
achieve at or above the state-established annual measurable objective that year in both mathematics and reading/English language arts (Porter, Linn, & Trimble, 2005, p. 32).

Public education was to benefit the common good; the problem was the immense difference in the quality of public institutions. Barnes (1997) stated, “Black Americans acknowledge that court-ordered integration and other desegregation policies have failed to integrate most urban schools or significantly increase access to quality education programs” (p. 2376). Public education today still holds strong to the democratic philosophy and is still opposed to choice options as it believes in equal educational opportunities for all. While we understand that “equal education implies we are giving every student the same thing and an equitable education provides students with what they need to achieve equality” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 9), realistically the quality of instruction and education children in the United States receives varies widely, however we still believe that an equitable education is our duty and what we strive for each child. When reviewing research on race and academic achievement Nieto and Bode (2012) reported that White students had higher scores than Black students, on average, on all assessments from the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report. Nieto and Bode (2012) continued to report that:

Clearly the gap between African American, American Indian, Hispanic, and some Asian (particularly Laotian and Cambodian) students compared to White students remains very large. The gap is not only deplorable but is also an indictment of our public education system. (p. 13)

I believe every child deserved a first class education and for this study I was interested in parents who were engaging in school selection to fully understand their meanings of school choice.
In the Kansas City Missouri School District, during the 1960s, there was a district-wide busing program to relieve overcrowded schools and to integrate Black students into predominately white schools, but instead it segregated them into demarcated classrooms and did not allow them to mix with White students (Gotham, 2002). Blockbusting was thriving during this time period. Blockbusting is when black Boston's renowned controlled choice program evolved out of a 1974 ruling that enforced desegregation of Boston public schools (Abdulkadiroglu, 2013). In 1985, a federal district judge took practical control over the Kansas City Missouri School District “on the grounds that it was an unconstitutionally segregated district with dilapidated facilities and students who performed poorly” (Ciotti, 1998, p. 1) and ordered the State of Missouri and the district to spend nearly $2 billion over the next twelve years. This money was used to build new schools, integrate classrooms, and bring student test scores up to national norms. Missouri vs. Jenkins, 1995, is a landmark Supreme Court case that ended the era of court-enforced desegregation. “To borrow from the court’s terminology, it has embarked on a defacto, rather than a dejure, dismantling of federal court supervision of formerly segregated school districts” (Joondeph, 1999, p. 599).

According to Parker (1996), “In 1995 in Missouri vs. Jenkins, however, the Rehnquist Court limited the remedial relief available to minority students by striking down district court efforts to improve student achievement and to attract white students back into the public schools” (p. 765). There was a real concern for fairness and justice for people of color, as well equal opportunity. Missouri V. Jenkins also demonstrated that throwing money at a problem does not always solve the problem. “Blacks lag behind whites in multiple measures of educational achievement, and within the black community, boys are falling further behind than girls” (Guinier, 2004, p. 92). So while Brown v. Board of Education was a turning point
for desegregation and expansion of educational opportunities for people of color, there were also hurdles faced then that still exist today. This court ruling did open the door for school choice for students, whose parents had the means to move within another school boundary line, for future inter and intra choice options, homeschooling, private education, charter schools, and magnet schools. Without the law that said segregation was wrong, choice may not have been an option.

On Monday, May 17, 1954, in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* the “separate but equal” principal became illegal. Parent choice expanded during this time. An outline of choice expansion in the United States follows (Table 2), taken from the work of the Rose and Milton Friedman Foundation.
## Table 2

*Timeline of School Choice Expansion in the United States*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event in Education</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1749</td>
<td>Benjamin Franklin founds a private academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid 1800s</td>
<td>Maine and Vermont continue practice of “tuitioning” students; meaning public school funds could be used at another school, public or private, to support parental school choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, outlaws racial segregation in government schools, transportations, textbooks and other supplies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Vermont Supreme court rules that using state funds to pay tuition at religious schools violates the state’s Constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1992</td>
<td>32 States change their compulsory attendance laws to specifically permit homeschool. By the mid-1990s all states permit homeschooling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Iowa enacts tax credits for educational expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Milwaukee [Wisconsin] Parental Choice Program is signed into law, giving low-income parents a publicly funded voucher to send their children to a private non-sectarian school of choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>First charter school established in St. Paul, Minnesota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Cleveland [Ohio] Pilot Project Scholarship Program is signed into law, giving students a voucher to attend the public, private or religious school of choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Wisconsin Supreme Court declares the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program does not violate the state’s Constitution. The U.S. Supreme Court denies appeal, allows ruling to stand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Florida enacts Opportunity Scholarships to allow children in habitually failing public schools to receive a voucher to attend a private or religious school or better performing public schools of choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Florida Supreme Court let stand a Court of Appeals decision that Opportunity scholarships are constitutional.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parental choice did not expand equally for all parents. Over the history of the United States choice options have expanded primarily for market consumers who had the economic ability, mobility, and time to do so, and to a lesser extent for the poor and socially deprived; especially charter, magnet, and inter and intra school options for those who live within the urban core.

While White prejudice and hostility toward Blacks were central features of racial relations during the late nineteenth century, they did not translate into racially segregated living patterns (Gotham, 2002). Our 1980, *Nation at Risk Report* shared that United States’ public schools were failing, so privately chartered schools became popular as another option for parents. In 1986 the National Governor’s Association approved the goal of providing choice among public schools (Lee, 1993). In 2013, parental school choice options still exist; though at a social justice price for those without the economic resources to make school choices for their children. Meanings of parental school choice have yet to be fully understood.

The quality of the child(ren)’s educational experience was extremely important, especially in the early formative years. Knowledge scaffolds throughout education, and all children need a firm foundation upon which to successfully build; hence the importance for children to attend a high quality school. Lee (1993) reported, “most functioning choice plans operate among public schools within particular districts, and these plans are certainly the most politically expedient” (p. 129). Given the complex challenge of providing education, and the vast difference in communities seeking to improve their schools, we must remember that school choice is not a uniform initiative.
Vouchers

There was not just one voucher plan, but rather many different ones. Tom Paine proposed a voucher plan in 1792, however the awakening of modern interest was usually credited to Friedman (1955, 1962), followed by Jencks (1966), Levin (1968), Coons and Sugarman (1978) and others (Mansi, 1992, p. 353). Friedman felt the tax support of public schools distorted the incentives faced by both consumers and producers of education. Friedman argued, “Assuming that society wishes to fund schooling at all, replacement of public school support with a voucher system would achieve this solution” (Mansi, 1992). The lack of data, at the time, made it impossible to compare choice and the then current financial system for education.

Supreme Court ruling:

Supreme Court ruling in Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925) ruled that prior legislation “unreasonably interferes with the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control. Thus considerable weight must be given to parents’ views on and choices of education. (Belfeld & Levin, 2005, p. 556)

Vouchers provided parents with the greatest freedom of school selection, a strong test of the competitive market, and they also generated the most opposition. Voucher program recipients had overwhelmingly been poor, low-income students and the programs varied widely. Many paid all tuition, some paid partial tuition, and some vouchers allowed funding for religious schools while others did not. Maine and Vermont had voucher-like programs in the 1800s which were for rural students, living in areas without schools, thus enabling them to attend public and non-religious schools elsewhere (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). President Reagan vigorously backed tuition tax credit proposals throughout his
administration and introduced a plan to reorganize the federal government’s major compensatory education (Lee, 1993). The schools would redeem the vouchers to the government for reimbursement. “Choice” became a buzz word during the 1990s with President Bush’s *American 2000 Excellence in Education Act*, which allowed parents to select a public or private school and provided financial support to a significant number of parents to allow them to make this choice. The bill was defeated in the Senate; however an alternate education reform was adopted. On January 23, 1992, the Senate rejected an amendment to this bill, which would have provided low-income parents subsidies to purchase private education (Ziegler & Lederman, 1991).

One of the theories was that the voucher market system would have schools competing for students and thus raise the level of education in schools. A concern with this theory was that schools would be “cream skimming” students; thus selecting only the best and brightest with the possibility of disempowering and possibly discriminating against the most academically challenged or poorest of our student populations. There were two types of “cream skimming.” First, families more financially stable took advantage of school choice at a higher rate than those with less means and access to information to take advantage of voucher programs. As documented by Levin (1998) “a second type of cream skimming refers to the tendency of schools to seek and choose students from families of higher SES and with high previous educational accomplishments” (as modeled by Nechyba [1996] and corroborated empirically in Belgium by Vandenbergh [1996]) (p. 379). The second type of
cream skimming could be reduced if the selection process required random selection.

America’s first publicly funded:

Voucher program was introduced by the Wisconsin legislature in April 1990, at the instigation of Annette ‘Polly’ Williams, an African-American democrat who had represented Milwaukee- a predominantly black urban district- in the legislature since 1980. Williams filed a bill providing for vouchers to be issued to children from low-income families in Milwaukee, enabling them to attend non-religious private schools. (Glen, 2003, p. 3)

The Milwaukee voucher experiment sought to directly assess the impact of vouchers on student achievement. In the voucher experiment students, who came from families with income no more than 1.75 times the poverty line, could attend private, nonsectarian schools in Milwaukee with public funds. Voucher funding was regulated:

The total number of choice students in any year was limited to 1% of the Milwaukee Public School membership in the first four years and was increased to 1.5% for the 1994-1995 school year. For each choice student enrolled, a private school received a payment equivalent to the Milwaukee Public School per-student aid, which was about $4,370 per student in 1996-1997. (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 21)

The results of the Milwaukee voucher system:

Seven schools participated initially, rising to 12 in the last two years. September enrollments in the private school program rose from 341 in 1990-1991 to 830 in the 1994-1995 school year, considerably below the maximum number eligible to participate, which varied from 931 in their first year of the program to 1450 in the fifth year. Attrition rates from year-to-year were considerable, varying from 46 percent in the first year to 28 percent in the fifth year, so relatively few students participated for three years or more. (Levin, 1998, p. 377)

Restrictions excluding religious schools were lifted by the legislature in 1995 and funding increased. Belfield and Levin (2005) reported “an educational voucher approach would provide government-issued certificates to parents that could be used at any school approved by the government to provide educational services” (p. 549). Within days, 72 additional
schools had indicated their intention to participate (Glen, 2003). Parents, who met the income level to receive educational vouchers, were given information to compare public and non-public schools so they could decide if they wanted to participate in the voucher program. Milwaukee’s participation in voucher programs had limitations on some of the data. Several studies have examined the effects of student participation in the Milwaukee choice program on student achievement. Effects and outcomes of choice programs:

Greene, Peterson, and Du (1998) and Rouse (1998) compared students who participated in the choice program with those who applied through the choice program to attend a private school but were rejected due to oversubscription (and thus attended a Milwaukee public school). If one assumes that students rejected from the program have similar non-observable characteristic (e.g., motivation) to those who applied and were accepted, then, in theory, the comparison of “selected” private school students to the “rejected” students avoid the problems associated with selection. Greene et al. (1998) found little evidence of private school effect for students in the first two years of the program, but a large private school advantage in years 3 and 4. For example, controlling for family background, they estimate a private school advantage on standardized test of 5 to 8 percentile points (depending on model specification) in math in year 3 and 3 to 9 percentile points in reading. (Golhaber, 1999, p. 22)

Report on the Milwaukee’s Public School findings:

The initial evaluation for the state of Wisconsin showed no difference in achievement between voucher and non-voucher students. A reanalysis using a somewhat different approach by Greene et al. (1998) found achievement advantages in both mathematics and reading for longer-term voucher students. A third evaluation that made considerable adjustments for data problems showed no difference in achievement for reading and a slight advantage in mathematics for the voucher students. (Belfeld & Levin, 2005, p. 560)

A similar phenomenon was occurring in Cleveland, Ohio:

In 1995 the Ohio state legislature enacted a voucher program for low-income families living in Cleveland, a city, like Milwaukee, with a heavily black enrollment in a notably unsuccessful public school system. The United States Supreme Court confirmed the constitutional legality of this program in June 2002. (Glen, 2003, p. 4)
Students in grades 0-8 were eligible for publicly funded vouchers allowing them to attend private school. Children in low-income and moderate-income families were given priority. Glen (2003) reported “funding for 2001-2002 supports $4,195 for students in 50 schools up to a maximum of $2,250 a year” (p. 4). Students identified in the special education program were eligible for additional funding to cover the additional costs associated with teaching them. The value of vouchers was less in Cleveland than in Milwaukee. In 2002, William Howell of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Peterson conducted a study that examined three privately funded voucher programs in three cities – Dayton, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Empirical research in 2002 discovered the following:

Studying the program in Dayton, Howell and Peterson found no visible difference across all students after two years. However, among black students—making up 72% of the participants—they did find gains. Black students scored 6.5 points higher on combined math and reading test after two years. Among non-black students, as a group, there was no visible difference. They found similar results in New York City. Among all students they found no visible difference after three years. Black students—who made up 42% of the participants—scored 9 points higher in combined test scores as a result of vouchers. Non-black students as a group showed no visible effects. Howell and Peterson’s data for New York were subsequently reanalyzed by two other teams of researchers. In 2003, John Barnard of deCODE Genetics, Constantine Frangakis of Johns Hopkins University and Donald Rubin of Harvard University reanalyzed the math scores in the first year of the program. They separated students based on the quality of the public schools they left to use vouchers. Among students leaving low-quality public schools they found a one-year gain of 5 points. During 2002 charter schools were exploding as a presence in Washington, D.C. Vouchers in this program did not cover the full costs of private school education, requiring parents to chip in some of the cost. Charter schools, by contrast, are “free” for parents, because they are funded by the government school monopoly’s tax revenue. We cannot know whether the benefits of the voucher program could have been sustained if they had been able to offer parents resources comparable to those of government-owned, government-funded charter schools. (Forster, 2009, p. 11)
According to Forster (2003) “ten empirical studies have been conducted on how Florida’s two voucher programs have affected academic outcomes at public schools. All is unanimously found that vouchers have improved Florida public schools” (p. 18).

A lesson learned was that the vouchers must be valued enough to encourage competition between schools. As research proved, just because some schools are failing, doesn’t mean vouchers are. As typically confirmed with scientific data, some privately funded vouchers do provide students with an educational experience that produces academic gains. Still, some drawbacks exist for vouchers. It was noted that the freer the “choice” system, and the larger the size of the voucher, the greater the resulting stratification of schools. Astin (1992) shared, “although having more elite schools could be viewed as contributing to the overall ‘quality’ of the system, it is hard to see how such a gain would not be more than offset by the further impoverishment of schools in the lowest strata” (p. 258). A concern was that federal dollars meant to support students in public schools would, in fact, support private schools if large numbers of student enrolled in private schools supported by vouchers. Research doesn’t support that this happened, at least not in Milwaukee. Another concern was that money meant to aid struggling students and schools would be going to the wealthier schools and students. This seemed to naturally lead to further social, ethnic, and fiscal disparities between the “haves” and “have not’s.”

There were only so many vouchers, so there was a limit on the number of students it could serve.

It has been documented:

Students do better when they have high socioeconomic status (SES) peers. However, it was found that there was no significant difference between the public and private sectors, as a whole, in terms of the efficiency of the delivery of education. That is,
Goldhaber found that with a given set of schooling resources there is no reason to believe that an average private school would do a better job of educating a group of students than an average public school educating that same group of students. (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 20)

Proponents of vouchers said that segregation may decrease with vouchers by breaking the cycle of housing and schooling, thus minimizing urban flight. Also, private schools may become less elite or superior with a more diverse population. According to Forster (2011), “probably the most important reason vouchers would improve public schools is because they give parents a meaningful way to hold schools accountable for performance” (p. 4). Existing empirical evidence on “who chooses” generally showed choice (in any of its forms) to be highly correlated with social economic status (SES). Urban areas generally contain government subsidized housing and thus frequently not students with the highest SES, thus if high SES parents are most highly correlated with choosing where to send their child(ren) to school, a conclusion could be drawn that the schools will become more segregated. The economic stratification amongst schools would become more derisive and there would be greater inequalities in attainment between social class groups. It would be advantageous for urban students to use a voucher to enroll in a private school where SES is greater, as research shows students do better when they have high SES peers, however research does not prove that a high percentage of urban parents take advantage of voucher systems. It was hoped that if alternative educational options were provided, large numbers of students would use their vouchers to choose better schools, requiring competition for students and theoretically failing schools would be forced to close due to low enrollment; this did not happen for a number of reasons. To begin with, the public schools of choice are assumed to lead to parent satisfaction (Goldring & Shapira, 1993, p. 405). The Foundation for Educational Choice analyzed ten
empirical studies using random assignment, to examine how vouchers affect participants.

“Random assignment” in research means:

Subjects are randomly divided into a treatment group that will receive the treatment being studied (such as vouchers) and a control group that will not receive it. Because the two groups are separated only by a random lottery, they are likely to be very similar in every respect other than the treatment. (Forster, 2011, p. 6)

Nine studies found that vouchers improved student outcomes; six studies demonstrated that all students benefited and three studies showed that some benefited and some were not affected. One study found no visible impact (Forster, 2011). None of the studies found a negative impact. How are parents to know if their choice resulted in measurable achievement gains, more than the school a child currently attends? What happens to students left behind in low-performing schools? Future research, on the utilization of voucher programs, should look at how to actively assist low-income urban parents in understanding their choices with vouchers and to look at data to make informed decisions on behalf of their child (ren’s) educational future. Another topic to research is the empirical evidence that vouchers, do or do not, naturally lead to the division of populations based on social, fiscal and cultural differences. Will parents make decisions based on sound educational criteria? With choice options we must be careful that “in a system with no options, ignorance might be bliss. In a system based on choice, ignorance is ruin” (Schneider et al., 1998, p. 772). We must remember educating students is complex work and vouchers are not a “cure all.” Choice was generally constrained; dictated by money, time, travel or means of travel, uniform costs, acceptance policies, and value parents place upon education; some or all of which may prohibited low-income students from utilizing the voucher system.
Magnet Schools

Magnet schools have a history dating back to the 1970s when they were used as a means of desegregation. Most magnet schools seem to be located in large urban districts. Parents wanted choice in where to send their students and magnet schools were one of many options that became available. Magnet schools tended to specialize in various academic or other specialty areas and generally enroll students from within public school district boundaries. One of the few magnet school studies to evaluate outcomes was a multi-year assessment of elementary magnet schools. Fifteen large school districts submitted data on the following: a) schooling outputs included reading and mathematics achievement, graduation rates; b) attendance, transfers, and suspensions. School and staff characteristics included school location, quality of facilities, student selection criteria, staff and student demographic information, and the theme and structure of schools:

The analysis of Blank et al.’s 1983 study showed that over 40% of the magnet schools had average reading and test scores equivalent to at least a grade level above the school district average, and a full 80% of the magnet schools had average reading and math achievement scores above their district average. Magnet school students also tended to gain more on standardized tests in year to year comparisons. (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 18)

Magnet schools accepted students based on various criteria, thus the students accepted into a magnet program were probably better able to score higher than some of the peers left behind at the public school. The current structure of magnet schools was only a partial reflection of parental choice in education due to enrollment constraints imposed. Did these magnet school students score higher based on the teaching and learning occurring in the new classrooms or did they arrive at their new magnet school with a good education? Were there differences in scores by gender or ethnicities?
Lacireno-Paquet and Brantley, (2008) stated that “data found on magnet schools, typically found in urban areas and large districts, come from the 2001-2002 Common Core of Data, which suggests that about 3% of all students attend magnet schools” (p. 8). A landmark study was conducted on magnet schools in the Montgomery County, Maryland. Both race and class were important issues parents were concerned about. The landmark study found the following:

Both whites and minorities tended to choose schools in which their children would less likely to be racially or socioeconomically isolated. White families were most likely to request transfer into schools with low proportions of minorities (these schools were also located in higher income neighborhoods), while minority families were more likely to opt for schools with higher proportions of minority students, which tended to be in low-income neighborhoods. (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000, p. 135)

An empirical study was conducted to examine whether school choice, through a magnet school, affected the segregation of low-income students in a school system. The study compared magnet-choice districts to central-assignment districts using statistical indices of economic segregation and statistical controls for city and district demographics. The methodology included adjusting the comparisons for city and district demographic differences. Archbald (2004) thought:

If statistically adjusted, the comparison of magnet and non-magnet districts would be substantially confounded by demographic differences among districts. To compare segregation outcomes between magnet and non-magnet districts, three indexes were used to measure the distribution of low-income students (those eligible for free lunches) among a district's schools. The predictor variable was the presence of magnet schools and school-choice policies; two levels of this variable were used versus central assignment of students. Data from interviews in 1991-92, as part of a large federally sponsored study by the U.S. Department of Education, used telephone interviews conducted with officials of 600 school districts to collect information on magnet schools and other types of policies for school choice and desegregation. The questions were designed by a team of national experts in the area of magnet schools, desegregation, and school-choice policy. The team worked with a prominent national
research organization in conducting the study the American Institutes for Research (AIR), of Washington, D.C., and Palo Alto, California. The interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interview system that was capable of detecting forms of inconsistent information provided during the interviews. Multiple interviews were sometimes conducted in districts with more complex policies and with occasional clarification callbacks. Of the districts that were targeted in the sampling frame, 1 percent refused to participate, and for another 5 percent, no data were collected because of difficulties with scheduling or contacting an appropriate district respondent within the study’s time frame. The nation’s 155 largest school districts were included in the sample, and school districts that did not offer the structural potential for school choice that is, did not have at least two schools at one grade level—were excluded from the sample. The final sample of 602 districts was drawn from a universe of about 6,400 districts on the basis of the 1990 U.S. census and data from the National Center on Education Statistics. (p. 293)

Findings from the study:

The size of a district and the demographic characteristics of the community show a clear pattern of associations with economic segregation among schools, private school enrollment has small effects in two of the models, and whether the district is a non-magnet or a magnet district does not make an additional difference after these other variables are accounted for. That is, the magnet school-choice variables are not significant in any of the models after the other variables are controlled. (Archbald, 2004, p. 299)

Parents were interested in a quality education for their students; safety and location of the school were legitimate concerns. Good schools tended to also be safe schools. If magnet schools did not exist, this research suggested there would be less mixing of poor and non-poor students. Evidence from Montgomery County found:

White families are likely to send their children to predominantly white schools in well-to-do neighborhoods, while minority families are likely to send their children to predominantly minority schools in neighborhoods with lower-income households. (Kleitz et al., 2000, p. 852)

Future research should seek to explore what practices currently are in place to help attract students who are underrepresented in the school, be it gender, ethnicity, race or culture.
Another research topic would be to study the consequences of magnet schools and SES segregation.

**Charter Schools**

In the early 1990s the charter school movement was sweeping across the United States. According to Wholstetter, Wenning, and Briggs (1995) the “movement is based on the underlying assumption that the existing model of public education – typified by the ‘common school’ that is good for all- must be expanded to offer more choices for students and parents” (p. 334). With magnet schools offering choices, innovations, and diversity the hope is they will increase academic achievement. Lubienski (2003) wrote, “Reformers, consistent with assumptions of market theory, expected that changes in school administrative structures would lead to different and innovative classroom practices” (p. 399). Charter schools were a mix between a public school system and a public-private choice. They offered a decentralized management approach in education that allowed individual schools to self-govern. Under the charter school concept, new school organizations were created by an educational charter, or a written agreement, between a group of individuals who wanted to operate a school and the charter-granting authority-usually a school district or state (Wholstetter, Wenning & Briggs, 1995). Without external controls the hope is more innovative educational practices will occur. Goldhaber (1999) shared that “charter schools are small, 60% less than 200 students and they are highly diverse in terms of the types of programs they offer” (p.19). Charter school laws gave chartering authority to local school boards or the state. In these circumstances choice remained dependent on their competitors.
The public schools have chartering power over magnet schools. Research discovered the following:

The vast majority of charter agreements leave accountability—what performance schools must demonstrate and what the school board or other public authority must do if a school meets or fails to meet its student performance goals—essentially undefined. Neither public officials nor charter school operators know for sure whether schools are obligated only by the specific terms of their charters or whether the schools must also abide by the rules that apply to other public schools. Consequently, charter schools in many states and localities are in danger of being drawn toward the dominant accountability practices of the public education system. (Goldhaber, 1999, p. 19)

Charter schools offered a rich variety of innovative practices in a local area, but did they deliver on being innovative? According to Lubienski (2003) “based on the evidence in the research on charter practices, charter schools appear to be using their administrative autonomy to experiment with many structural and programmatic approaches that offer parents more options” (p. 412). Parents liked choice in choosing the best school for their child. Empirical research on parents’ ability to choose a good school for their child(ren) has been documented. Lewis Solmon tested the critics’ fears by comparing how parents and experts at the Arizona Department of Education rated 239 charter schools. The research results:

Across the board, state officials and parents gave nearly identical grades to the charter schools in question. Parents and state officials agreed on the best charter school, and the average grade point average of each school on the “overall grade” question showed an exact match for 11 of the 14 schools selected with the largest number of parents responding to the survey. (Blast & Walberg, 2004, p. 431)

Why does government stipulate where our child attends school when research suggests parents are equipped to make those decisions? In the future it would be interesting to extrapolate the parent’s input by parental educational level and see if the ability to agree
on the best charter school would be significantly different based on educational attainment. Another empirical research study conducted at Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, and Minnesota, collected survey data from teachers in a matched paired sample of charter and traditional public schools in the spring of 2006. This study was part of an ongoing research project of the National Center on School Choice. Some charter schools, that matched public schools, used the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) during the 2004-2005 academic year. The four states were Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, and Minnesota. The methodology was:

Fourteen charter schools were tested by NWEA in Colorado, 16 charter schools were tested in Idaho, 18 were tested in Indiana, and 28 were tested in Minnesota. In total, the 76 charter schools tested by NWEA in these four states composed the sample of charter schools for the matching process. We used the sample of public schools tested by NWEA in the four cluster states to identify matches for each of the 76 charter schools. They used school zip codes to identify a list of public schools tested by NWEA within a 5, 10, 15, or 20 mile radius of each charter school. They used geographic proximity as our initial criteria for inclusion in the matching process so as to improve the overall match by garnering a list of potential comparison schools as similar as possible before matching. (Goldring & Cravens, 2006, p. 1)

The findings:

The limited empirical research on improved and differentiated instruction and in school organizational conditions, curriculum content, and pedagogy in charter schools, is mixed, neither providing support for market theories nor institutional theories. (Goldring & Cravens, 2006, p. 5)

School-wide quality teaching and learning curriculum and processes are what makes a difference in schools coupled with student’s ability to learn. Goldring and Cravens (2006) said, “An important hallmark of charter schooling and other reform efforts is to grant teachers influence over school decisions” (p. 9).

Data on educational preferences of charter-school parents, conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of North Texas, captured 1,100 parent appraisals through
interviews. The study sought to find out if there was a difference based on race and/or class in what parents say they want from schools. Results of this study indicated, “…each group considers education quality the most important concern, followed by class size, safety, the location of the schools and the presence of students’ friends at school” (Kleitz et al., 2000, p. 850). In reviewing additional literature the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado, created three elementary-level alternative schools, open to any child in the district, to provide educational choice for the diverse expectations of the community. The three schools were: (a) The Core Knowledge School (a back-to-basics school which also stresses character education and discipline), (b) The Lab School (emphasized small pupil-teacher ratio and child-centered developmental curriculum) and (c) The Harris Bilingual Immersion School (strong bilingual skills and cross-cultural knowledge). After the schools had been in operation for two years the Research and Development Center for the Advancement of Student Learning conducted an intensive battery of telephone interviews with a 20 percent random sample of families with children enrolled in these schools. The interview sought to find out; (a) who uses the schools, (b) why they use the schools, and (c) parents’ level of satisfaction with their children’s educational experiences. Findings from Bomoti’s (1996) research indicated that in all three cases the vast majority of parents chose to enroll their children in alternative schools for reasons that matched the educational philosophies and practices stated by the schools. Parents seemed to understand the educational program and philosophies differences among the schools and chose their child’s school based on those premises. Interviews of parents whose students continued to attend neighborhood schools were not included, another concern, or limitation of this study is that parents interviewed
learned about alternative schools through friends and neighbors, which favored those parents already in-tune with the educational community.

**Home Schooling**

Home schooling was the ultimate in privatization; a school choice option in the United States that is legal in all 50 states. Home schooling referred to the education of children under the supervision of parents (Reich, 2005). There are two types of homeschooling; 1) complete home schooling, and 2) home-based schooling. Complete home schooling is when children are home schooled and there is no interaction between the public school and the children. Parents took complete control and ownership for their child’s education. Home-based schooling was when students utilized resources from a school, for example the child may participate in extracurricular activities or participate with other children during “specials” class, which may be orchestra, band, guidance, etc., often for socialization purposes (Belfield, 2004). Home-based instruction could also include home schooled children participating in distance learning options delivered by a school. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in 2001, there were approximately 800,000 to 1 million students home schooled in the United States (Belfield, 2004), 2003 estimates place the number of home schooled children at 1.1 million (Reich, 2005), and in 2007 around 1.5 million children were homeschooled (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Clearly, statistical NCES data from the United States demonstrates a positive trend that home schooling is gaining popularity as an educational choice option. Parents who have particular educational preferences or parents, who are dissatisfied with the quality of public education, may choose home schooling as a school choice option. Another motivation for home
schooling is the desire for parents to deeply influence and be involved in their children’s daily lives. “Some conservative Christians, who view the training and education of their children as a sacred responsibility given to them by god” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013, p. 10) view their instructional role a core commitment to their child(ren).

Homeschooling children was not easy work for parents and not all students who started as homeschoolers end their high school career as a home schooled student. The literature reviewed shared that of the homeschooled parents more than half send a least one of their children to a conventional school, and more than one-third of homeschooled children return to institutional schooling after the first year; lower for religiously motivated families (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Isenberg, 2007). Home schooling required a financial commitment from parents as it typically was privately funded, privately provided, and almost always privately regulated (Belfield, 2004). “The families most capable of exercising such a choice for a reasonable duration are (typically) two-parent, middle-income families with mothers who are not in full-time employment” (Belfield, 2004, p. 9). While homeschooling was advantageous for some families it discriminated against those with few resources who cannot afford the money to purchase learning materials, who have the time to be their child(ren)’s teacher, and who have obtained a level of education upon which to instruct from. Mothers tended to be the most responsible for home instruction (Reich, 2005). Mothers who had a bachelor’s degree were more likely to homeschool their children because they could teach them or less likely because of high opportunity costs (Isenberg, 2007). I found it interesting that parents who lived in a district with mothers who held a bachelor’s degree are more or less likely to send their child(ren) to a public school depending on if the parents perceived the children of the well educated women to be good classmates (Isenberg, 2007).
What specific criteria or behaviors parents were looking for in the children from households with educated mothers was not provided, this key understanding could prove beneficial to understanding meanings behind why parents chose home school versus public school when given the choice.

Academic achievements of homeschooled were difficult to discern. “Research on home schooling is in its infancy and what little research currently exists is either of poor quality or is capable of reaching only very limited conclusions” (Reich, 2005, p. 10). Thus there was no evidence that demonstrated home school children fail, and conversely there is no evidence that it succeeds. Research by Kunzman and Gaither (2013) stated that “the subject of homeschooler academic achievement has received much scholarly attention, but unfortunately most of this work contains serious design flaws that limit it’s generalizability and reliability” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013, p. 16). Whether a parent was advocating for homeschooling as an educational choice option or was an opponent of home school choice, what I did not read in the literature was the meaning of choice for parents. The phenomenon of parental school choice was the rich, thick data I was seeking in this study.

Private Schooling

Private schools, unaffiliated, affiliated, conservative Christian, nonsectarian, and catholic, had significantly played a part in the history of education in the United States, though the number of students enrolled in private schools had declined since 1995. Between 1995-96 and 2005-06 Catholic schools maintained the highest private school enrollment; however the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools in 2009-2010 was higher than
the total number of students enrolled in other religious schools (NCES, 2013). There was a
difference in where racial and ethnic groups attended private schools.

As reported by NCES (2013):

Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian/Alaska Native students and students of
two or more races all had higher percentages of students attending Catholic
schools than other religious or nonsectarian schools. In contrast, there was a
higher percentage of Black students attending other religious schools than
attending Catholic schools. White and Pacific Islander groups had higher
percentages of students attending Catholic schools than nonsectarian schools.
(p. 2)

Findings from the 2009-2010 Private School Universe Survey, conducted by NCES, found
the following findings: 1) Largest number of private schools in 2009-2010 were in suburban
locations (11,609), followed by those in cities (10,810), followed by those in rural areas
(7,607), and then by those in towns (3,340); 2) the average pupil/teacher ratio in 2009-2010
was 10.7 across all private schools; 3) ninety-eight percent of 12th graders enrolled in private
schools around October 1, 2008 graduated by the fall of 2009; and 4) seventy-three percent
of private school students in 2009-2010 were White; 9 percent were Hispanic or Latin,
regardless of race; 9 percent were Black or African American, 5 percent were Asian, 3
percent were of two or more races, and less than 1 percent were American Indian or Alaska
Native, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Knowing who is enrolling in private
schools is important; however this study aims to find the deeper meanings of the school
choice phenomenon.

The history of private education started as a way to preserve religious values that
were feared to be lost in public schools. The common school movement, led by Horace Mann
during the 1830s and 1840s, lengthened the provision of schools as it expanded the state
share of total enrollment at the expense of privately-controlled schools (Glen, 1998). Public schools were to ban the religious beliefs of parents and teach the “pure religion of heaven” (Glen, 1998). In the 1840s many Catholic immigrants flooded the United States and they demanded that the Protestant religious elements in education stay with the common school and they would begin a Catholic school. Leading the private school movement was the Roman Catholic Church, which in November of 1884, decreed her members to seek a Catholic school education for their children (Davis, 2011). The right for parents to choose a private education for their children came in 1925 with the Supreme Court’s decision in Pierce V. Society of the Sisters; case respecting the right to educate a child in a school of a parents’ choice (Minow, 1987). Ohio V. Whisner is another legal case which directly impacted private schools. As reported by McTighe (2005), in 1976 the Supreme Court of Ohio ruled:

That while the state can enforce reasonable regulations on private schools, in carrying out its regulatory role, government must seek to avoid imposing on private schools rules “so pervasive and all-encompassing” that compliance would effectively eradicate the distinction between public and private schools and thereby deny parents their capacity to guide their children’s education. (p.3)

Parental decision making, and the right as the children’s first teachers to guide their educational choices, was honored. Another legislative act that sought to help students in struggling school districts occurred in 2001. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act empowered parents with knowledge, a “report card” that informed parents on the quality of their child’s school and provided choice options for parents who had children in failing schools, meaning of schools did not make adequately yearly progress. The U.S. Department
of Education (2008) reported the following for parents concerning No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB):

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, children from low-income families who attend schools in need of improvement for two or more consecutive year are given the opportunity to receive free supplemental services—such as tutoring and other academic services provided outside the regular school day—from a variety of state-approved providers. Parents have the opportunity to choose the provider that best meets the needs of their children. (p. 2)

A variety of organizations were eligible to provide services, including faith-based organizations, for-profit companies, school districts, private schools, charter schools and community groups. These services were governed by the 2 Uniform Provisions in Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and mandated equal services to eligible private school students. These benefits, for example, targeted assistance for students who are having academic difficulty, financial assistance to improve the education for migrant students, and professional development for private school teachers, were considered services to students and teachers and not the private school entity (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Assistance to students in private school settings was now available. In 2004, the U.S. government authorized the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act, which operated the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, the first federally funded scholarship program in the U.S. that provided scholarship for tuition, fees, and transportation expense for students from low-income families in the District of Columbia to attend participating private schools of their choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Up to $7,500 could be received by students enrolled in the D.C. School private school. In 2009, the President set aside $18 million in his budget for this program.
Over time, legislation and the federal government had consistently given parents the opportunity for school choice and had even offered academic assistance for students in struggling schoolings to provide extra assistance from a variety of approved vendors, private school being one. What was missing from private school research was the meaning of school choice for parents. There was information concerning what parents desired when choosing a private school, but missing a deep level of understanding of the meaning of school choice. Intertwined with parent school choice is the notion that some parents have more knowledge, which knowledge produced power in decision making that was not shared or known by all parents. We will now take a closer look at what the research says about power and knowledge.

**Power and Knowledge**

School choice capitalized on power and knowledge, not something all parents had access to. We should not be passive citizens on this topic; each one of us, even the oppressed, should fight for and collaborate with educators and society to provide a quality education for every child. Sefa Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2007) remind us that “while recognizing that power is predominately a social concept, we cannot forget that individuals do have an agency and ability to act within and in spite of the confines and constraints of the larger social power structure” (p. 5). Parents who participated in school choice were of all nationalities, races, and genders. Sefa Dei et al. (2007) report:

> It should be realized that racism and oppression are such an integral part of our Western contexts that they have attained an almost accepted/acceptable station in our cultural/political/social milieu. That position is solidified through common sense beliefs, rhetoric and practices that seek to mute and down play the impact and scope of racism and oppression. (p. 9)
Peggy McIntosh (1988) wrote about power and privilege with the invisible knapsack; sharing that white people carry with them certain unearned privileges and power that other races do not have; she classified this knowledge as dominance. She asserted, “such privilege simply confers dominance because of one’s race or sex” (Macintosh, 1988, p. 191). For example White people are not asked to speak on behalf of all people of their race, they see other White people in books, magazines and film, and if they need assistance they can feel confident that their race will not work against them. This privilege should be afforded to all people, not just those born into it. “It seems to be that obliviousness about White advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 192). Democratic choice was available to those with the means to make choice which propagates power.

Michael Foucault’s analysis of knowledge and power claimed, “the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (as cited in Jardine, 2005, p. 25). The cycle of knowledge and power perpetuated each other and it is those who had this knowledge that gained power and could make educated decisions. We need to share this knowledge so all can be powerful. Foucault reminded us to listen to the truths of people who are marginalized; referring to this as subjugated knowledge as well as “each one of us must decide to what extent, and why, we are willing to be complicit in perpetuating this knowledge, these techniques of power, and their effects on the lives of our children – and ourselves” (as cited in Jardine, 2005, p. 29).

I am White, privileged and do not feel as though I have abused my rights and absolutely, in no way feel as though I am superior to anyone; I was raised to know
differently. In fact, while growing-up at my parent’s house I was reminded of this through phrases such as, “you are no better than anyone else” and remember that “all people put their pants on one leg at a time” to remind me that we are equal and to not be intimidated by others. To this day I respect titles people have earned, whether educational degree titles or position titles in a company, but at the core of my being I know each person was physically created the same and it is the quality of our experiences, opportunities, education, internal drive, self-efficacy and natural God given talents that sets us apart. I am also a realist and understand that the level of wealth or poverty one is born into does have a lifetime impact upon a person; however with a quality education and self-determination the level of educational attainment has no ceiling for anyone; outcomes for each individual are unknown. McIntosh (1988) wrote: “…the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native American say, should not be seen as privileges for a few. Ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them” (p. 191). Education is the great equalizer; however it is a solid education that is needed, not something less than. Peterson and Hassel (1998) said:

It is not enough to ensure that the disadvantaged have access to schools funded publicly. Taxpayers should also demand that the schools they fund be effective and educating young people. In a system of choice, we might expect parents to hold schools accountable for effectiveness. (p. 41)

I know all children can rise to their educational potentials and become knowledgeable, strong, caring citizens who can positively impact their own lives and those they touch. Lisa Delpit (2012) provided research-based evidence that when born, both Black and White children are the same. According to Delpit (2012):
Differences between the two groups [Black and White children] tend to even out prior to schooling. The data thus far collected indicates that African American and European American children tend to equalize abilities by about age four or five, after which many of the trends tend to reverse. Some suggest the environmental conditions of poverty and/or racism then create conditions that the initial advantage of black children cannot overcome. It is also conceivable that inappropriate schooling has the effect of reducing continued progress. (p. 5)

For too long, excessive numbers of students of color have not been academically succeeding in school at the level they are capable of. “The gap between Blacks and Whites in academic achievement is historical and nationwide” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 3). I think we would all agree that, “the consequences of these disproportionally high levels of low achievement are long-term and wide-reaching, personal and civic, individual and collective” (Gay, 2010, p. 1).

Participating in a quality educational program, whether the school district informs you where your child(ren) will attend school, based on residence, or by parent’s making an active educational choice for their child(ren), parental meanings of educational choices can impact school policies and practices, as well as policy makers.

Parent school choice and power and knowledge continue to impact our educational institutions, our cultural relationships, and our avenues for acquiring information upon which we make educational decisions for our children. Some parents are passive, others active, and yet some nonusers of school choice; however I believe all parents seek superior educational opportunities and experiences for their children. Our country prided itself on a free and appropriate education for all students, however the rigor of that education varies widely across our country; thus capturing the meanings of parental choice will help schools with policy considerations and policy makers with real world feedback upon which to make a difference for all students. America, often referred to as the promise land, still holds great
promise for our children; educators, parents, and the community must continue to fight for equal opportunities and a quality education for all students; it is in working together we can achieve, divisiveness only pulls us apart.

Cultural Diversity and Parent School Choice

Parents in the United States sought a free and appropriate public education, or selective school choice option, for educational attainment for their child(ren) in the hopes the next generation would be better educated and perhaps more financially secure. Nell Noddings (2002) talked about ethics of caring and said, “what seems logical is that a parent owes to her children the conditions and resources that produced the treasured capacities in the parent” (p. 27). Tomlison (1997) noted that, “Migrant and minority group parents have consistently demonstrated their belief that good educational qualifications are essential if their children were to become equal citizens with rights and chances alongside children from the majority group” (p. 63). Opinion polls cite academic quality as the primary or most nearly the primary reason for school choice and most opinion studies show that racial composition of the school is largely irrelevant for parents when making school choice options (Tedin & Weiher, 2004). It was suggested in readings (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012) that parents use multiple criteria when choosing schools, rather than objective and sequential, as rational theory suggested, based upon the empirical research juxtaposing contradictory findings from research on school choice. What parents profess in opinion polls is not always practiced in real life. “In some cases, economically disadvantaged students of color in Denver used choice to transfer out of mostly white and wealthy districts to districts with greater percentages of children from their own backgrounds” (Cobb & Glass, 2009, p. 265).
This means our urban centers that serve a high percentage of people of color, and minority students and families, have inadequate resources, facilities, and lower quality schools, typically isolated from wealthier citizens, which further segregates our communities, provides more advantages to the privileged, and exacerbated disadvantages and delivered inferior education to the minorities. Research, such as this example, demonstrated that there exists a preference among some parents for schools with peer compositions that look similar to their own child’s race and social status. One issue with this is in the United States educational quality is highly correlated with community income (Cobb & Glass, 2009). This means our urban centers that serve a high percentage of people of color and minority students and families have inadequate resources, facilities and lower quality of schools and are isolated from wealthier citizens, which segregate our communities, provided advantages to the privileged, and disadvantages and inferior education to the minorities. While we understand that, “equal education implies we are giving every student the same thing and an equitable education provides students with what they need to achieve equality” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 9), realistically the quality of instruction in the United States varies widely.

Are the various children in the United States academically achieving at similar rates?

Achievement data, as reported in NCES (2010) for students in the U.S. indicated:

> On the 2007 main National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment, high percentages of Asian/Pacific Islander and white 4th- and 8th-graders scored at or above Proficient than did Black, Hispanic, or American Indian/Alaska Native students at the same grade levels. At 12th grade, a higher percentage of White students scored at or above Proficient than did Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic students. (p. 53)

The achievement of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students are of concern. If educators seek academic success for every child we certainly are failing some
students. Not only is academic proficiency a concern for these students, but also the incidents of suspension and expulsion. As reported by NCES (2010) in 2007:

Of students in grades 6 through 12, a larger percentage of Black students (43 percent) had been suspended than White (16 percent), Hispanic (22 percent), Asian (11 percent), American Indian/Alaska Nation (14 percent), and students of two or more races (25 percent). In addition, a higher percentage of Black students had been expelled (13 percent) than was the case for White students (1 percent), Hispanic students (3 percent), and students of two or more races (4 percent).

Are Black students, and students of two or more races, being treated unfairly for suspensions and expulsions? Are these students being discriminated against because of their ethnicity? Prejudice and discrimination are manifestations of economic, political, and social power (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Social ills and poverty negatively impact student’s ability to learn, I do not mention it to create a crutch or justification for problems in schools, but rather a reminder that schools cannot solve inequality and stratification that exists in our society alone. “Discrimination always helps somebody – those with the most power – which explains why racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination continue in spite of the fact that everyone claims to be against them” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 65). This is a social justice issue that communities seem to be aware of, but receives little attention, though we are all U.S. citizens and all children in our country deserve a first class education. Unfortunately, it is noted that “Racism has always been implicated in the acceptance or rejection of particular groups in U.S. society” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 388).

When participating in school choice, there was some diversity in the consumers of information. Research suggested that low-income parents were less informed consumers of school quality, (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007); yet a study of low-income charter school parents did not support that claim. Kelly (2009) stated, “the literature suggests that if
greater school choice is to be extended meaningfully to economically disadvantage families, there must be greater financial incentives for good schools actively to recruit pupils from low-income families” (p. 94). Numerous studies concluded that White, higher-income, and more formally educated parents rely more on social networks, whereas lower-income and less formally educated parents rely primarily on school-based information (Bosetti, 2004; Holme 2002; Schneider et al., 2000) for school choice. Kelly (2009) concluded:

It is difficult for opponents of school choice to claim that choice per se increases social segregation; it is equally difficult for advocates of choice to claim that its introduction, when accompanied by other reforms, has a causal relationship with improvement. (p. 100)

This is particularly highlighted if some parents were choosing to segregate themselves and have their children attend schools with peers that mirror their economic and social communities. “While there is clear-evidence in a number of countries that education markets encourage social class segregation by school, there is also some evidence that ethnic and racial segregation is exacerbated by parent choice” (Tomlison, 1997, p. 67). Public education ensured all students, first through twelfth grade an education, though it may not live up to its’ ideal, it is still worth fighting for. “Public education remains a noble ideal because it is one of the few institutions that at least articulates the common good, even if it does not always deliver it” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 7). Obtaining parent’s first-hand meaning of choice will help develop an understanding of the phenomenon and better inform research.

**Benefits of Engaged Parents**

Research has shown that students perform better in schools academically with engaged parents and parents of school choice tend to be very involved in their child(ren)’s
school. Research also purports that “all students benefit from family involvement in education, and low-income and minority students benefit the most” (Henderson, Carson, Avallone, & Whipple, 2011). Since research has validated that involved parents do make a difference in the education their child(ren) receives, it would seem that studying the multiple meanings parents have for school choice would help to uncover the many reasons why parents choose certain schools. Understanding the meanings and reasons for school choice could provide ideas on how to improve parent involvement ultimately benefitting children and the quality of the educational program they receive. Empirical research by Semke and Sheridan (2012) reported that:

> Family-school connections, linking parents and educators and promoting shared responsibility for children’s academic success are instrumental in addressing the needs of students and may be particularly beneficial in promoting achievement gains for students in rural settings. (p. 43)

More research is needed to be conducted that emphasizes the unique influences in the rural context.

In yet another empirical study by Galindo and Sheldon (2012) correlations of school and home connections with kindergarten achievement gains found that, “schools that conducted more activities to engage families tended to have parents who reported higher levels of involvement at school but not higher involvement at home nor higher educational expectations” (p. 100). This data came from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) Kindergarten class of 1989-1999; a national sample of about 21,000 kindergarteners in over 1000 schools. The study reported that, on average, children whose parents were more involved in their schools and held high expectations for their children
tended to outperform peers (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). The study also looked at math and reading achievement of students and Galindo and Sheldon (2012) concluded:

After running separate tests for reading and math, the Sobel test indicated that family involvement at school was a significant mediator of the influence of school outreach efforts on achievement gains for reading and math (Sobel test statistic = 2.03, p = 0.04 for math and Sobel test statistic = 1.96, p = 0.05 for reading). (p. 99)

Across our country, whether urban, suburban, or rural, students benefit from parents being actively engaged with the educational system. According to research by Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsy, and Sandler (2007):

Parental involvement has long been believed to be associated with a range of enhanced school outcomes for elementary, middle, and high school students, including varied indicators of achievement and the development of student attributes that support achievement, such as self-efficacy for learning, perceptions of personal control over school outcomes, and self-regulatory skills and knowledge (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Frome & Eccles, 1998; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Craft, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; Xu & Corno, 2003). (p. 532)

Research suggested students benefit when parents help their child(ren) both in the schools and in the home environment, and that schools should actively seek opportunities to engage parents in partnering with their child(ren)’s school. In understanding the difference engaged parents make in the lives of students, it is important to ask what effective practices can school administrators utilize to engage parents in their child’s school? Below are a few practices school administration and teachers could employ to increase parent engagement both within and outside the schoolhouse. When working together as partners, “teachers and administrators create more family-like schools” (Epstein & Associates, 2009, p. 11). In nurturing family-like school students feel safe, cared for, and comfortable to take risks.
**Action Team for Partnerships (ATP)**

One practice administrators and schools could engage in developing is an action team for partnerships (ATP). According to Epstein and Associates (2009), “The ATP takes responsibility for assessing present family and community involvement practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, delegating leadership or other activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices” (p. 20). When engaging in ATP the school looked at the reality of current practices to build a plan to better partner with parents and the community and used data to drive decision making. Partnerships did not develop on their own, they took time, sustained effort, and were increased incrementally over time.

**School-Family Compacts**

Administrators can assist teachers with engaging parents in their school community by developing a school-wide, agreed upon, parent-school compact. In the compact schools share that they will provide high quality education, stress the need for two-way and frequent communication, as well as the compact outlines responsibilities of parents. Responsibilities of parents may be monitoring school work, engaging in communication with the teacher and school community, perhaps volunteering in the classroom, and participating in parent-teacher conferences. “Conferences are successful when teachers and the school system create a climate that invites collaboration with parents” (Office of Educational Research & Improvement, 1996, p. 21). Administrators will need to support their teachers, parents, and community as they work in unison to provide the best education for our youth.
Learning at Home Program

The learn at home program is designed to send information home to assist parents in their desires to help their child(ren) with homework but often cannot be of assistance. Administrators can be a supporter of learning with the at home program; guiding new teachers in development of podcasts, YouTube videos, hyperlinks on classroom websites or other social media venues that will catch your persons’ attention and show them how to help their child(ren) problem solve. “Parents with different backgrounds may display different types of involvement because they differ in regard to habitus” (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 198).

These are a couple of ways in which school administration could work collaboratively with teachers and parents to increase parent engagement in an effort to assist students in their educational pursuits. This type of work required individuals to be tireless, passionate about what they do, and dedicated to the hard work to reap the endless joy of student achievement. It is in giving that we receive; a servant leadership approach to teaching and partnering with others.

Summary

Parents today still have the educational choices of private school, public school, magnet school, inter and intra-school, home schooling, and charter schools; all depending on what the district offers where they reside, economics of the parents, and what they perceive as valuable. Often where you live dictated whether you had a choice of educational options for your child(ren). Parents with financial means and the ability to relocate their residence have virtually all choices open to them: 1) Public school, 2) Charter Schools, 3) Magnet Schools, 4) Private schools, 5) Home schooling, and 6) Intra and Inter School options.
According to NCES (2002):

The proportion of public school children attending a chosen school (rather than the school assigned by residence location) has increased in recent years. In 1999, for example, 16 percent of public school students in grades 1-12 attended a school the family had chosen, up from 12 percent in 1993. (p. 2)

While this is great news for those economically secure, choices for the poor and those trapped in dysfunctional or low academic success rate schools are not afforded the same opportunities. In fact, research on residential zoning in urban areas intentionally discriminated against the poor and people of color. Initially I was pro-school choice, with the philosophies that families are all very different and we have different values, choosing the school that is “right” for your children seems best. However after reading evidence from research and negative outcomes of social, racial, and SES stratification, I am ashamed of what has happened in our country’s history, and continued to this day, that disadvantaged the poor and people of color. I certainly need to continue to delve into and seek additional empirical research to make an informed decision as to be, or not to be, a supporter of magnet or charter schools. Charter and magnet schools had early roots in desegregation and were intended to provide a better education for low-income students; however in its’ attempt to integrate, it further segregated students. Some of the research refuted the negative implications and denoted the success of vouchers, magnet, and charter schools on student’s academic achievement. Further research is needed to understand why schools with segregated, low-income students in repeatedly academically failing charter or magnet schools continue to be options. How long do we fail our children before the state intercedes? The United States prides itself on providing a “free and appropriate public education”, at what point do U.S. educational leaders say the achievement is so low that it is not considered an
appropriate education? Stereotypically the U.S. has relatively “good” public schools in the suburbs and poor public schools in our inner cities evidenced by low academic performance, high drop-out rates, and higher violence rates than found in other parts of the city. Evidence from empirical research studies suggested that school voucher programs benefit disadvantaged youth. Additional research is needed to fully understand the impact of school voucher programs.

Those who can afford to choose the schools they want their children to attend will, either by residential location or through private education. It is the students in the urban schools, generally, where charter and magnet schools are located, that the U.S. educational system is failing our students who have the least means and/or resources to move to neighborhoods with better schools. We need bold leadership to close schools that repeatedly fail students academically, or intensively work with the staff on teaching and learning in an effort to stop robbing children of their futures.

Who participated in this research, their background, and lived experiences had an impact on collected data. Thus the design and methodology of this dissertation played a significant role in what and how data was collected, analyzed, and synthesized for findings. Chapter three outlines the methodology that was under taken for this dissertation.
Research on parental school choice in the United States had focused largely on private, magnet, intra-school or inter-school, and charter schools using a quantitative method (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Convey, 1986; Darling-Hammond & Krivy, 1988; Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Schneider et al., 1998; Williams et al., 1978). Through an extensive review of the literature, only one study (Holme, 2002), was discovered that sought to understand the multi-meanings of parental criteria for public school choice. Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball (1994) shared, “there is little attempt to consider how parents and/or children ‘make choice’, and whether they are actually involved in the process that could be correctly characterized as choice making” (p. 76). Thus, the problem was that there was limited knowledge and awareness of multiple meanings concerning parental criteria for school choice. The purpose of this narrative, phenomenological, case study was to describe the deeper multi-meanings of school choice for parents at a Midwestern, mid-size suburban public middle school. The unit of analysis was parents’ meanings of public school choice. The multi-meanings of parental choice was defined as the untold, multi-faceted understandings of values, beliefs, and underlying personal preference of a school or district to discover meaning.

The two overarching questions that guided my study were: 1) What are the meanings of school choice for parents?; and 2) What resources do parents use to develop meanings about school choice? Five sub-questions addressed were:

1) How do parents define school choice?
2) What experiences do parents attribute to their meanings of school choice?

3) How do parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children?

4) What resources do parents ascribe to, to construct their meanings of school choice?

5) To what social and economic resources do parents ascribe to conduct their meanings of school choice?

The significance of this study was to conduct scholarly research to understand the complex, deeper meanings of why parents chose to send their child(ren) to a specific school district, studying in a particular middle school; a topic on which there was limited research and thus could make historic contributions to rural, suburban, and urban practice, social change, and policy. This scholarly work had the capacity to guide strategic learning and community capacity building when the essence of parents’ complex, multi-meanings of school choice, and utilized resources were understood.

In this chapter, I describe the rationale for qualitative research as well as an overview of case study, the major approach and theoretical traditions; narratology and phenomenology. The study design included setting, participants, data sources, and organization and management of data. Understanding how the data was analyzed is important, thus another component of this chapter will include the data analysis plan, description of procedures used to analyze each data source, and a detailed description of procedural steps. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations and ethical considerations. First I will begin with a rationale for qualitative research.

**Rationale for Qualitative Research**
Qualitative studies tended to examine small groups of people in great, rich detail while preserving individual data in their analysis. Due to the depth of knowledge, and understanding obtained from small samples of individuals researched, qualitative researchers can understand events, actions and meanings shaped by unique circumstances (Maxwell, 2013). Since I researched a small group in great detail I used a purposeful, criterion sampling of 5 parents, representing 5 students, for rich, thick descriptive data. Whitley and Crawford (2005) shared, “unlike quantitative research, which sets a premium on reducing data to easily comprehensible units (for example, averages) qualitative research consciously attempts to document the complexity and multiplicity of experience” (p.108). Marshall and Rossman (1999) said, “in qualitative inquiry initial curiosities for research often come from real-world observations, emerging from the interplay of the researcher’s direct experience, tacit theories, political commitments, interests in practice, and growing scholarly interests” (p. 25). The rationale for using qualitative research was to understand the stories and multiple meanings of parent choice from the small group of participants who had experience with the phenomenon; this fits a qualitative paradigm as it captured participant’s direct experiences and sought a depth of knowledge and essence of meaning that could not be transcribed and understood with numbers; personal inquiry was needed. Qualitative research allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of my participant’s meaning of parent choice, the phenomenon being studied. Naturally phenomenology and its’ “study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses” (Patton, 2002), and narratology with its influence from phenomenology from the participant’s interpretation and context of their lived experiences and perceptions of experiences, made these logical traditions for this study. For researchers, the closeness of the case study to real-life situations and its wealth of details are important in
two respects: One, it is central for the development of a nuanced view of reality, including and understanding that human behavior is complex and cannot be meaningfully understood as simply rule-governed acts. Second, cases are important for researchers’ own learning processes as we develop skills to conduct good research. (Flyvbjer, 2006) Viewing these participants as a single holistic case study, one group within a single environment allowed for exploring meaning from data comparisons in this one case. Case study, narratology, and phenomenology traditions helped me to obtain first-hand, rich, thick data concerning meanings of parental choice, something only possible through qualitative research.

I elected to use a narrative phenomenology study informed through case study theory; with the purpose of describing and understanding meanings of school choice through participants’ stories they shared. While interviews were the major data source, I also gathered participant feedback from an open-ended survey and narratives. Qualitative research requires the researcher to utilize multiple sources of data throughout their study as opposed to relying solely on one data set (Creswell, 2007). Next I will provide an overview of each tradition.

**Theoretical Tradition of Case Study**

Case study was the major research technique that informed this inquiry. Case study research was defined as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Case study was a research strategy which focused on understanding the dynamics present within single settings (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 532). All parents of students in this particular suburban middle school, attended school in a particular district, were considered one case. Case study, like other research strategies, was a way of
investigating an empirical topic by following a set of pre-specified procedures (Yin, 2003, p. 15). According to Tellis (1997), “The earliest use of this form of research can be traced to Europe, predominantly to France; from the early 1900's until 1935, The Chicago School was preeminent in the field and the source of a great deal of the literature” (p. ). According to Stake (1995) there are three types of case studies: (a) intrinsic, (b) instrumental, and (c) collective. Intrinsic case studies are when the researcher is intrinsically interested in the study; they have a need to learn about a particular case. Instrumental case studies are used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation. It provided insight into an issue or helped to refine a theory; the case itself is of secondary interest, it played a supportive role, facilitating our understanding. (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Collective case study was when several studies were used. Intrinsic case study aligned and represented the researcher and the intent of this study well. With intrinsic case study, there was little interest in generalizing to the species; the abiding interest is in the particular case, yet there too the case researcher examined a part or the whole, seeking to understand what the specimen was, how the specimen worked (Stake, 1995, p. 36). This study was an intrinsic case study.

A case can be a person, an event, a program, an organization, a time period, a critical incident, or a community (Patton, 2002) and it may be comprised of a single or multiple case studies (Gillham, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The collected data from 5 parents, who enrolled their child(ren) in a particular Midwestern, suburban public school, were the participants for this single case. Single-case studies were also ideal for revelatory cases where an observer may have access to a phenomenon that was previously inaccessible (Tellis, 1997). Regardless of the unit of analysis, a qualitative case study sought to describe that unit in depth and detail, holistically, and in context (Patton, 2002, p. 55).
Correspondence and patterns were the major strategy, followed by coded data for this case. The search for meaning often was a search for patterns, for consistency, and for consistency within certain conditions, which was called “correspondence” (Stake, 1995, p. 78). As the instrument of my inquiry, the case study approach helped illuminate the phenomenon resulting in a better understanding and depth of parent choice meaning.

**Theoretical Tradition of Narratology**

Nineteen fifty-five was the year Eberhard Lämmert and Franz Stanzel both published extended studies of narrative form, and thus antedates the famous issue of Communications by over a decade (Darby, 2001). Darby (2001) also wrote narrative had a:

Long tradition in German philology, a prehistory that is entirely different from that of the Structuralist project. It derives its basic categories and lines of inquiry from classical poetics, and this derivation manifests itself in the fact that the canonical texts of German narrative theory often have as their context the study of the relationship between the epic and the other genres. (p. 830)

Chase (2008) wrote:

Predecessors of today’s narrative researchers include the Chicago School sociologists who collected life histories and other personal documents during the 1920s and 1930s, Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918/1927) *The Polish Peasant* is frequently cited as the first significant sociological use of life history. (p. 653)

Todorov coined the term narratology in 1969 in an effort to elevate the form to the status of an object of knowledge for a new science (Patton, 2002, p. 115). Narratology was the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that tell a story (Bal, 2009). Narratives, in this research, provided participants a means in which to elaborate and share their story of what they derived school choice meaning from, decisions made, variables impacting decisions, and reflections on that
decisions now that they have been in a district of choice for at least one year. Narrative was a term used to describe a variety of ways humans perform the “telling of events” (Overcash, 2004, p. 15). There were different forms of narratology, both as a phenomenon being studied and a method used in a study (Creswell, 2013). In this research the narrative was a method to collect rich data. The narrative tradition sought the personal, innate collection of participant’s thoughts and experiences. A prevailing conceptualization of narrative was that it was one of many modes of transforming knowing into telling (Sandelowski, 2007, p. 162). Patton (2002) said it:

…the honors people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience worthy as narrative documentary of experience (the core of phenomenology) or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political and dramatic dimensions of human experience. (p. 116)

For the purposes of this study I used participant narratives to describe participants’ meanings for school selection, to understand the meaning of the phenomenon, school choice. Narrative research was best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) acknowledged narrative inquiry as a form of living, a way of life. Thus, narratology seemed most appropriate with the small group of parents, both in their personal documents which described their emic meanings for school choice that included their unique life stories, as well as captured this during the interviews. Emic meaning referred to one’s perspective of the culture being studied or first-hand experience.

**Theoretical Tradition of Phenomenology**
In the late 19th century, phenomenology emerged as a reaction against the then dominant scientific (positivist) view of philosophy and psychology (Ehrlich, 2005). German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl (1859-1959) first developed phenomenology as a philosophical tradition. Husserl has been widely regarded as father of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Farber, 2006; Patton, 2002) and was influenced in particular by Merleau-Ponty (1962), Whitehead (1958), Giorgi (1971), and Zaner (1970) (Patton, 2002). The work of Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) was an important influence in applying and establishing phenomenology as a major social science perspective (Patton, 2002). Phenomenological study described the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) and focused on what they had in common with experiencing a phenomenon. There were two approaches to phenomenology; (a) hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990), and (b) empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutic science involved the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances were fully understood (Moustakas, 1994) and in transcendental the phenomenon was perceived and described in totality. Transcendental phenomenology tradition was chosen for this study as it sought and described experiences and procured a fresh perspective on the phenomenon under study. Transcendental meant “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). In this case study the participants were able to share written descriptions of their experiences that created meaning for school choice, as well as first-hand described meanings of choice through an open-ended survey and interviews; thus transcendental phenomenology method, with the search for personal meaning and essences of
the experience, seemed like the perfect tradition to include in this research design. Moustakas (1994) stated:

The very appearance of something makes it a phenomenon. The challenge is to explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings, thus discerning the features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essence of the experience. (p. 49)

The experiences of parents who had familiarity with the phenomenon of school choice were sought to gain their meanings for school choice.

**Design of the Study**

**Setting, Participants, and Sampling Techniques**

The setting for this study is a Midwestern, mid-sized suburban public middle school. This middle school was selected due to certain criteria; (a) Midwestern school, (b) mid-sized, (c) suburban public school district, (d) decrease in Black and Hispanic student enrollment, however an increase in Asian students while Indian enrollment fluctuates from .20% to .30% to .20% the last three years, ending in 2013. White population, while total student enrollment, continued to increase (see Figure 1). This site was chosen as I was looking for a suburban, middle school research site whose total enrollment was growing, that exhibited a trend toward increasing diversity among the student populations (as evidenced by both a racial diversity, students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ELL students, and district diversity).
The district had five elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and one career center. The particular middle school site selected for this study predominately served students from middle to upper class families and was appropriate for this study as there were multiple middle schools, thus enabled the opportunity for parental school choice. Students in this school attended sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. As reported on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Core Data as submitted by Missouri Public Schools in 2012, this particular middle school had a total enrollment of 582 students January, 2012. The school’s population consisted of five racial groups: .2% Asian, 5.2% Black, 3.8% Hispanic, .3% Indian, and 89.1% White. Of these students, 17.4% participated in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). There are two administrators in this building, one acted as lead principal and the second as an assistant principal, as well as 1.5 counselors; one counselor is full time and another counselor split her time between this middle school and the second middle
school in the district. The student to teacher ratio was very favorable; in 2011 and 2012 the ratio was 1:19, and in 2013 the ratio is 1:18 (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). The teachers at this school were, for the most part experienced and well educated; in 2013 the average years of experience among the teachers was 14.2 and in 2013 there were 83.8% of the teachers with a master’s degree or higher (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). With both low class sizes and a well-educated staff, this middle school provided a small town feel, in a suburban setting, while providing highly educated staff to best meet the educational, personal, and social needs of the students.

The participants were selected using criterion and purposeful sampling as the sample strategies. That is, all participants who meet the selected criteria were considered and were viewed prior to choosing the 5 parent volunteers for this study. As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) shared, “In criterion sampling, individuals, groups, or settings are selected that meet criteria” (p. 114). The rationale for criterion sampling was to ensure all participants had experience with the phenomenon, thus criterion sampling met the aims of this research study. Purposeful sampling was chosen to study, in-depth, a few participants to derive rich information concerning meanings for parental choice. Patton (2002) said, “Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 230). The sampling process was conducted in two phases.

The first phase used criterion sampling, looking at all of the parent participants who chose to participate in the study and selected the best varied participants that meet the requirements of the study. The second phase used a purposeful sampling technique utilizing narratives, and interviews.
Phase One: Criterion Sampling

I had written permission from the cooperating school district, as well as the principal at this Midwestern, suburban middle school, to conduct my research in their district and at this specific school. Late September or early October, 2013, a letter indicating research purpose and objective was sent home with every 6th, 7th, and 8th grade student, through the Communication Arts classes, within the specific research site, letting them know I am seeking volunteers for this study who meet the criteria. If interested in voluntarily participating, parents completed the consent form (Appendix A) and open-ended survey (Appendix B). This section sought basic parent contact information including race, gender, level of education obtained, identification of grade level children are in, family income levels and information regarding special programs in which students participate in. Parents were also asked to complete an open-ended narrative inquiring about their experiences with the meaning of school choice. The open-ended questions served as both a sampling strategy and as a data source. It was the intent of the researcher to disseminate the research study request for specified participants and receive feedback over a two to three week window. Five parent participants were selected from the pool of interested parents who had experience with the phenomenon and were as diverse as possible in regard to race, gender, educational level, and the grade levels representative of their child(ren), special program child(ren) participated in and language spoken in the home, and family income levels.

Phase Two: Interviews and Narratives

Upon receipt of respondents to the letters of volunteer participants, I reviewed parental requests to participate and the information provided on the letter as to why they
wished to participate. It was during this time I utilized purposeful sampling to ensure the participants met the following: a) parents of a child(ren) in this specific, Midwestern, middle school; b) specifically made the choice to enroll their son/daughter in this district; c) had experience with the phenomenon school choice; d) have been in the district for at least a year; and e) diversity- the family is representative of the desired cultural diversity. Participant volunteers who were selected for the study were notified by email, and received a second consent form to participate in the interview and narrative data collection as required by the Social Science Institutional Review Board (SSIRB). I follow-up the email with a reply email or phone call to establish dates/times for personal document retrieval (hard copy or electronic copy) and interview dates.

Purposeful sampling played-out in Phase Two as I collected narratives, conducted initial interviews, and follow-up interviews with this selected group to gather information rich data concerning the meaning of school choice. Case studies required the researcher to draw extensive data from multiple sources on each case (Creswell, 2007). Thus thick data was learned from each participant and all were compared/contrasted as one case study. The choice of this group and these methodologies were purposeful.

**Data Sources: Surveys, Narrative, and Interviews**

Within the field of qualitative research, findings grow out of three kinds of data collection: (a) in-depth, open-ended interviews, (b) direct observation, and (c) written documents (Patton, 2002, p. 4). This research utilized open-ended surveys, narratives, and interviews as data sources. Triangulation, or collecting information from a diverse range of
individuals and settings, using a variety of methods (Creswell, 2013), reduced the risk of chance associations and biases that could happen with one data source.

**Surveys**

A fixed and open-ended combined survey was utilized. “At the simplest level, a questionnaire or interview that asks both fixed choice (closed) questions and open-ended questions is an example of how quantitative measurement and qualitative inquiry are often combined” (Patton, 2002, p. 5). The fixed portion of the survey was used as a sampling technique, providing information about the parents that was used to both help decipher the most diverse group of participants to participate in the study. The second part of the survey was open-ended questions that helped uncover the meanings of parental school choice. As Patton (2002) stated, “the open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents” (p. 21). The survey provided a framework upon which to probe parent’s emotions, thoughts, and experiences that reveal their meanings of school choice. It was a means for participants to use their own language; as a researcher I derived meanings from their direct quotes and word choices that expose the reality of their world. This was precisely what I was seeking, participants’ histories of how they came to make the decisions they did concerning school choice and what that meant for them.

**Documents**

Documents could be categorized as either primary or secondary documents and this was my second data source. Primary documents included first-hand accounts of events, such as meeting notes, government reports, records, etc. Secondary documents included interpretations of events. According to Fitzgerald (2012), “data from documents can be used
to highlight a range of perspectives on a particular event, activity, group or individual and can be further utilized to determine the representativeness of such a document” (p. 297). Records, documents, artifacts, and archives- what has traditionally been called “material culture” in anthropology- constituted a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs (Patton, 2002, p. 293). Narrative documents may include fairy tales, myths and legends, diaries and letters, interviews, artifacts, paintings, movies, journal articles, autobiographies, or photographs. Narrative “stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (Creswell, 2013, p. 71); they provide a detailed, contextualized story. Personal narrative stories were the second data source in my study. For this research I asked participants to complete one personal narrative throughout the study, which was classified as a personal document. By using documents a study is placed at some distance from real people; human action and thought are interpreted through representations of reality (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 348). Records, documents, artifacts, and archives…..constitute a particularly rich source of information about many organizations and programs (Patton, 2002, p. 293).

The purpose of the narratives was to solicit the meanings of parental choice from five parents who had experience with school choice; to gather rich, thick data to help understand the deeper meanings of choice from the lived experiences of those who had experience with the phenomenon. These personal documents applied to this study as they provided first-hand accounts capturing and illuminating the essence of the meaning of choice from individuals who chose their child(ren’s) school. Narratives provided personal reality and made known what could be hidden from everyday view, behind complex organizational processes that operationalized both a system of categorization and particular technical procedures by means
of which the things that are categorized, grouped, and constructed (Delamont, 2013). Qualitative inquiry honored people’s stories as data that could stand on their own as pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience (the core of phenomenology) or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political and dramatic dimensions of human experience (Patton, 2002, p. 116). Pithouse-Morgan, Khau, Masinga, and van de Ruit (2012) also supported narratives as valid sources of qualitative data; “letter-writing has been used as a qualitative method for self-reflexive, collaborative research by a number of scholars to generate data through which to re-examine themselves and their lived experience” (p. 43).

I believed rich ‘thick’ descriptions allowed me to enter into my participants’ worlds and understand how meanings were developed, what meanings stemmed from, who was attached to those meanings, how they influenced decisions, and the resources used to make decisions. This first person based narrative evidence provided documented accounts of people’s lives and their personal meaning(s) of choice; an understanding that was mostly unknown, or minimally captured or researched. Empirically their [stories] provided access to individual’s claims about how their motivations, emotions, imaginations – in other words, about the subjective dimensions of social actions had been shaped by cumulative life experiences (Maines, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 3). These narratives expanded ideas and thoughts about the individual and how the person was shaped by society and life experiences and choices. The narrative prompts participants received are provided in Appendix C. Participants were asked to submit the personal narratives electronically, if possible, and copies were stored on a flash drive, and hard copies printed. The hard copies were used for coding.
Interviews

The third source of data for my study was interviews. Interviews were among the most familiar strategies for collecting qualitative data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, Creswell, 2007, Maxwell, 2013, Patton, 2002, Yin, 2009). The interview was a conversation – that art of asking questions and listening (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 47). Qualitative interviews placed an emphasis on listening and following the direction of the participant/informant (Law et al., 1998, p. 5). Interviews helped me understand the lived experiences and meanings of participants and were conducted through one-on-one and interviewing. I intended to enter the world of participants to apprehend their meanings of choice. Interviews gave me the opportunity to “explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others” (Rubin & Ruin, 2012, p. 3) and see the world through the lens of others. According to Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) interviews were used to “elicit participants’ views of their lives, as portrayed in their stories, and so gained access to their experiences, feelings, and social worlds” (p. 727). Patton (2002) shared, “interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 4), thus qualitative interviewing entailed much listening to participants. Interviews provided access to other’s experiences and thus “qualitative interviews explore new areas and discover and unravel intriguing puzzles” (Lichtman, 2013, p.18) that is a critical piece in the advancement of a qualitative study.

To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview was the primary method of data collection (Merriam, 2009, p. 25). Interviews could be structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. For my study the
interview with each parent was semi-structured. Semi-structured interview format lies between structure and unstructured interviews. “The semi-structured interview involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner imposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate response” (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). I choose semi-structured interviews so I could follow-up and ask questions based on participant’s information and seek deeper questions that assisted in gathering the rich data that determined the meaning of school choice from the participant’s experience and perspective. Qu and Dumay (2011) stated, “it [semi-structured interviews] proves to be especially valuable if the researchers are to understand the way the interviewees perceive the social world under study” (p. 246). I interviewed people to find out from them those things I cannot directly observe (Patton, 2002).

All interviews were conducted in a place of the participant’s choosing and were individual interviews, as opposed to group interviews. “The individual in-depth interview allows the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 315) and this is what I sought to get at the heart of meanings of school choice. Two interview sessions were conducted with each participant for approximately 60 minutes each; the first based on the interview questions that guided this study and the second interview was a follow-up interview that asked additional questions of participants from their initial interview. This second interview was extremely important to seek focused clarity and understanding, but to also critically reassess that what seemed to be happening is that which was really happening. Both a conversational interview strategy and a semi-structured interview guide was used. An interview guide was prepared to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each person interviewed (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The
second central research question and subsequent sub-questions were used to understand resources parents used to develop meaning about school choice. An additional probing question was contextualized according to the interview responses. The probing questions sought deeper understanding in an effort to try and capture the essence, or meaning of parental choice, and how parents made sense of their personal and social worlds. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer can depart from the planned itinerary to follow digressions as they can be very productive (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were audio only recorded using an iPad tablet computer so I could focus on what the participants were saying and not worry about missing any information they were sharing. A few critical notes were written during the interview and used as reminders of key points to recall when transcribing. I personally transcribed the script in an effort to increase my familiarity with the participants’ stories. Participants were asked to review the transcripts for completeness and accuracy and to make any modifications as needed. It should be noted time was also spent texting or emailing participants, after the second interview and when writing the dissertation, concerning validation of collected information.

Open-ended surveys, narratives, and interviews were the three data sources used throughout my research study. Next, the data analysis plan will specify how the data was analyzed, interpreted, and reported. In qualitative analysis, “we aim to account for events, rather than simply to document their sequence” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 4).
Data Analysis Plan

This single case study sought to understand parents’ meanings of school choice through narrative, phenomenology, and case study analysis processes. Narrative analysis sought to understand the lives and meanings of a participant’s choices through stories. Savin-Baden and Howell (2010) defined narratology as, “…characterized by the analysis of texts through formalized structured categories” (p. 71). The oldest and most natural forms of sense making are stories or narratives (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). Narratology does not have a specific approach, rather there are several to choose from. This study utilized pattern coding looking for themes in which the researcher analyzed what was spoken or written during data collection. As reported by Braun and Clarke (2006), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 79). Themes were identified in one of two ways: (a) inductive; or (b) theoretical. An inductive approach was used in this research study. Patton (1990) said the themes are strongly linked to the data. Inductive analysis was therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. Narrative analysis was applied to the data obtained in the open-ended survey and personal narrative.

Phenomenological analysis sought to understand the essence of the lived experience of the phenomenon through a participant’s lens, constructed in their lived, social world. According to Moustakas (1994) the “aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (p. 13). Transcendental phenomenology had specific steps that were adhered to and were exclusively applied to the interviews. In case study a generic coding analysis to identify
themes and patterns for a single case, both within and cross-case analysis, was utilized. The case was specific, a complex functioning thing (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Data was collected for each case and then compared and contrasted for a cross-case triangulation analysis to gather a rich, thick description of the phenomenon and essence of meaning of parental choice.

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative qualitative inquiry honored people’s stories as data that could stand on their own as pure description of experience or be analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramaturgic dimensions of human experience to reveal larger meanings. (Patton, 2002, p. 478) Narrative analysis referred to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have a common storied form (Creswell, 2013, p. 189). The selected parents were asked to provide the researcher with answers to an open-ended survey and a narrative that described their stories concerning meanings of parental choice for their child(ren)’s education with thoughtful reflection, recall, and sharing of their reasons, experiences, and other influential information through a type-written letter, electronically emailed, or hard copy, to the researcher during the Fall of 2013. In keeping with confidentiality for the participants, I used a pseudonym name. The purpose of both the open-ended survey and letters was to understand the meanings, by garnering deep, personal and complex meanings of parental choice; in essence, peering into their world learning how and what contributed to meaning of choice. Surveys and personal documents were re-read for thematic analysis; looking for themes and patterns in each story and then across participant’s stories. The personal experiences, emotions, resources and stories in this study helped to understand the meaning of parental choice.
Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenological analysis sought to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton, 2002, p. 482). There was a focus on intentionality: referring to consciousness, the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related (Patton, 2002, p. 483). In particular this study utilized transcendental phenomenology which “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45).

The phenomenological process consisted of the following steps: 1) epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis of texture and structure. Moustakas (1994) described epoche as:

Disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside pre-judgements regarding the phenomenon being investigated in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies – to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated. (p. 22)

I began my research with an open mind being receptive to whatever occurred and whatever was learned from my research on meanings of parental choice. Phenomenological reduction consisted of several steps, 1) bracketing, 2) horizontalization, 3) invariant themes, and 4) textural portrayal of each theme. During bracketing, the data concerning meanings of parental choice were looked at in pure form and taken apart and dissected. According to Patton (2002) bracketing involved the following steps: 1) locate key phrases and statements that spoke directly to the phenomenon in question; 2) interpret the meanings of these phrases,
as an informed reader; 3) obtain the subject’s interpretations of these phrases; 4) inspect these meanings for what they revealed about the essential, reoccurring features of the phenomenon being studied; and 5) offered a tentative statement or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential reoccurring features identified in step four. I listed and grouped expressions relevant to the phenomenon, an activity known as data horizontalization. When we horizontalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). After this, the data was organized into meaningful clusters and repetitive or overlapping data eliminated. Invariant themes were identified in the data and the data was viewed from multiple perspectives to perform an imaginative variation on each theme. Next a description of the experience for each participant, that did not contain that experience, was generated, known as textural portrayal of each theme. Step three in the phenomenological analysis process involved a textural-structural description. This meant I described the meanings of the experience for each participant, according to Moustakas (1994) a “synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (p. 144).

**Cross-Case Analysis**

For this research I used a single case study approach, made up of several cases. Each case was treated separately and the appropriate analysis applied, then combined and cross-case analyzed as I looked for themes, patterns, and outliers of the phenomenon. Cross-case analysis enabled one to “deepen understanding and explanation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 173). One strategy in cross-case analysis I used was to list similarities and differences, of the phenomenon, between cases. Through examining similarities and differences I hoped to find commonalities of resources, events, opportunities, values that lead to school choice.
Though the goal was not to generalize, I am open to and anticipated common threads that very well could benefit schools, future parents, and policy. A second strategy was to divide the data by source (survey, narrative, and interviews) and analyze similarities and differences. This tactic exploited the unique insights possible from different types of data collection (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 541). Eisenhardt (1989) stated, “when a pattern from one data source is corroborated by the evidence from another, the findings are strong and better grounded” (p. 541).

No study is perfect; all studies have some limitations and ethical considerations. Next, I identified the limitations and ethical considerations of this study and the strategies used to address these limitations. A review of ethical considerations for studying and interacting with human beings was required for scholarly research.

**Limitations including Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations**

Limitations for this study was that the research was inconclusive; knowledge has been gained about what the research says about school choice over the last 20 years, but there has been no decisive outcome. In this study, I identified four potential threats to the validity and reliability of this study: (a) researcher is the instrument of the study (bias), (b) novice researcher, (c) time to collect “thick” data, and (d) influencing the participants during data collection (reactivity). I worked to establish a trusting relationship with participants to diminish the threat of bias or intimidation. What I brought, as the researcher to this study is known as a bias. In an attempt to eliminate bias I made my assumptions known and bracketed any preconceived ideas. Researchers in the field of qualitative research have long recognized bias and the researcher as the instrument of the research. (Maxwell, 2013) Early
in this proposal, I self-disclosed my assumptions that shaped and could skew my inquiry. I assumed that there are multiple meanings for parental choice that were influenced by various sources. I also brought my bias into the study thinking that school and community values were perceptions; they may or may not be reality. Lastly, I believed that parents who chose their child(ren) school are happier, thus more involved in their child’s education.

Focused epoche, or setting aside prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas helped me to see what was before me; experiences and meanings of the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective. From the epoche, we are challenged to create new ideas, new feelings, new awareness and understandings (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). Throughout the research I tried to remain neutral, allowing the research to unfold naturally while capturing an “inside” understanding. Patton (2002) supported the notion of neutrality; “any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of neutrality with regard to the phenomenon under study” (p. 51). As the researcher, I remained open to the study, but I also wanted to capture my thoughts and ideas through reflective journaling.

As a novice researcher I will make mistakes; I am not experienced in using various theories and methods and thus may adhere more strictly, or narrowly, to one approach than an experienced researcher who could seamlessly transfer, between or among, several theoretical methodologies to meet the needs of the participants. Since there were three traditions in this study, I am bound to make some errors. To reduce error and increase the reliability of the data, I employed systematic procedures and followed the clearly identified procedure for each tradition. Qualitative research takes much time to collect “thick” data, it is open-ended and less structured than quantitative research, and findings cannot be sought from one research strategy. As explained by Creswell and Miller (2000), “…thick
descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts…..thin description, by contrast, lack detail, and simply report facts” (p. 128). To create “thick” data I described the setting, participants, and the themes in vivid detail. In an attempt to avoid influencing the participants during data collection, I asked open-ended questions and avoided any leading questions. We sought a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions (Creswell, 2013, p. 246). A lack of diversity in the population sampled (high concentration of middle/upper class) may be a limitation. Future research studies, in a more racially and socio-economically diverse educational setting, could strengthen, or question, the results of this study.

When qualitative researchers speak of validity, they are usually referring to qualitative research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy, and therefore, defensible (Johnson, 1997, p. 282). The credibility issue of qualitative versus quantitative research stirs discussions and questions of validity and reliability. Qualitative research viewed the participants through the personal lens of the researcher when reading and reviewing a study as opposed to quantitative studies where we are concerned with numbers, instrument used, and content validity. More commonly, writers make the case that qualitative perspectives, rather than statistics, generates different assumptions regarding reality, thus demanding different conceptualizations of validity. Validity is referred to by Creswell and Miller (2000) as, “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them” (p. 124). Any account of validity, to be productive, should begin with an understanding of what qualitative researchers actually do to establish validity” (Hannes, Lockwood & Pearson, 2010, p. 1737). According to Lewis (2009), there are five threats to validity: 1) descriptive validity, 2) interpretation validity, 3) theory validity, 4) research bias,
and 5) reactivity. Descriptive validity reminded me to ensure the words were recorded accurately during interviews. Since I recorded the interview, it helped validate my descriptive data. Interpretation validity means to accurately interpret what was said. To avoid compromising interpretation validity, I used open-ended questions that allowed participants the opportunity to elaborate on their ideas and perspectives. In theory development, researchers must not force research to “fit” a certain theory.

In an effort to validate my theory development, rich, thick descriptions and direct quotes were used and all data documented, even if it didn’t support the theory. Next a transcript of the recordings was created upon which participants were asked to validate their interview responses and to provide feedback to clarify documentation; a process known as member checking.

Merriam (1995) defined member checking as, “taking data collected from study participants, and the tentative interpretations of these data, back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if the interpretations are plausible, if they ring true” (p. 54). Member checking helped to validate what occurred, or was said, was present and the documentation was accurate; increasing validity and confirming credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) shared, “Lincoln and Guba described member checks as the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 127). Our participants were given a pseudonym in an effort to provide anonymity, allowing them the freedom to speak freely; assuring that their input is honest.

Researcher bias was addressed previously; with this research I utilized epoche and entered research with a neutral perspective toward the phenomenon, after all I sought to understand the participant’s perspectives. Reactivity, “…defined by behavioral scientists as the negative or unintended effect on research subjects being studied” (Patterson, 1994, p. 301), is something I am aware of and watched for signs of possible behavior inconsistencies which
may be due to reactivity. I made note of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors in my notes. Lastly, since little is known about the multi-meanings of parental choice the findings in this study may or may not be representative of peer groups in general. This study utilized transferability which referred to applying the findings of a study in context similar to the context in which they were first derived (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992), to reduce validity threat.

Participants served to deepen the understanding of the investigated experience; not for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 140). Exercising care not to over generalize from purposeful samples, while maximizing to the fullest extent possible the advantages of in-depth, purposeful sampling, will do much to alleviate concerns about small sample size (Patton, 2002, p. 246). By using a variety of sources and resources, I built on the strengths of each type of data collection while minimizing the weakness of any single approach (Patton, 2002, p. 307). To ensure the information was reliable triangulation was used. Validity is like integrity, character, and quality, to be assessed relative to purposes and circumstances (Maxwell, 1992, p. 281). Reliability was concerned with the extent to which one’s findings will be found again (Merriam, 1995, p. 55). In quantitative research repeated measures of a phenomenon indicated the findings were reliable using “objective” measures; whereas the notion of reliability in and of itself is problematic (Merriam, 1995). As humans our behavior varies and measurements could be incorrect. Qualitative research assumed that reality is constructed, multidimensional, and ever-changing; there is no such thing as a single, immutable reality waiting to be observed and measured (Merriam, 1995, p. 54). In qualitative research we look to ensure the results of the study are consistent with data. In this study I worked to establish a trusting relationship with participants to assist with data being valid and
reliable. My relationships were built on mutual respect, trust, and cooperation. Also, I kept both the participants’ identity and their information confidential, as well as be non-judgmental and honest, in an effort to increase validity and forthrightness of participants to divulge personal meanings choice held for each of them.

**Ethical Considerations**

With every research study there are potential ethical problems, including power, privilege, and risk to participants. Prior to any research being conducted, study participants read and consented to the study, thus giving them power to participate and understand what was expected of them up-front. In this study I asked participants to member check what was scripted to validate and provide credibility to the accuracy of what was being documented; it also gave participants power to make changes or document scripts as truth. This research aimed to understand meanings of parental choice, thus I have built in consent and member checking to give the power to the participants to acknowledge data as truth. Privilege is another source of possible ethical dilemmas. The informational research letter I sent home with students, this November, 6\textsuperscript{th}, 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th} grade parents will state that I sought parents who met the criteria and wanted to participate. There was a section on the letter with data that included, race, ethnicity, highest level of education obtained, and grade level child(ren) are enrolled in, as well as a reason for wanting to partake in the research project. When choosing research participants, this data allowed me to select a diverse sampling of parents for the project; I was hopeful this would help reduce any feelings of privilege. Lastly, I do not anticipate harm to participants in this study. By member checking it is my hope that participants had the power and capability to change anything that was incorrect or may be
harmful to them (emotionally, interests, self-esteem, etc.). “The information from qualitative is never value-free” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 292) and participants may withdraw from the research at any time if they are uncomfortable and no longer wish to participate.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, for the protection of human subjects of research (1979), wrote the Belmont Report. This report established basic ethical principles and guidelines concerning research with human subjects. According to the report three basic ethical principles and their corresponding application were: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Building relationships that are mutually respectful and collaborative with participants was very important and demonstrated respect for participants. In my first meeting with the participants, or before, collected voluntary research study participant consent, documenting that they are participating at free will and under no coercion; participants may withdraw at any time. A release form to audio tape the conversations, to avoid ethical issues, was signed. Since we are dealing with human subjects this is a concern. Confidentiality of collected data will be a concern. Data was kept in a locked file cabinet during research and for seven years following the research study. Participants will not be named in the study, rather a made-up name will be used to refer to participants. Credible data also comes from close collaboration with participants throughout the research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). Thus, I learned what my participants’ perceptions and understanding are of me and my research in order to develop useful and ethically appropriate relationships with them (Maxwell, 2013, p. 93). Participants were co-researchers in the study, actively involved in the research through an open-ended survey, narratives, and interviews. Data was safe guarded and parents receive a number that corresponds to them, however only
the researchers will know or have access to the number key. Respect for persons, beneficence, and justice will be upheld in this study, as outlined by the Belmont Report.

As stated on the University of Missouri-Kansas City website (2012), “the Institutional Review Board (IRB), concerns itself with the maintenance of ethical standards and the protection of human research subjects.” Sieber (1992) stated, “the purpose of the IRB is to review all proposals for human research before the research is conducted to ascertain whether the research plan has adequately included the ethical dimensions of the project” (p. 5). As noted above, consent forms were obtained and no research was conducted until the IRB committee had approved this research proposal.

As the researcher I cannot fully remove myself from the study. This spoke to reflexivity, or “the fact that the research is part of the social world he or she studies, and can’t avoid either influencing this or being influenced by it” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 90). In phenomenological science, a relationship always exists between the external perception of natural objects and internal perceptions, memories, and judgments (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). For these reasons I kept an on-going reflection log to capture my thoughts and to keep them separate from the participants’ data so in the end I could provide a full textural description of my experience. Such a science [phenomenology] required a return to the self and employment of a self-reflective process that enabled the searcher increasingly to know herself or himself within the experience being investigated (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). As such, I was aware of the purpose for undergoing this particular study. Assumptions I brought to the study; being that I believed parents have specific reasons for choosing a particular school and that if uncovered and understood those meanings could be used to improve building and district policies and practices, as well as to maybe provide guidance for young
married couples who may not yet have thought about children and schools. Throughout the research process these beliefs were bracketed so the research could be viewed naturally. When gathering personal documents, I did not have a role other than to answer any questions they may have had and gather their personal stories. During open-ended, focused interviewing I actively asked participants questions from a pre-generated interview guide, as these questions focused on understanding parents’ meaning of school choice. Interviews were recorded in an effort to focus intently on what was being said and to be able to transcribe the interview. All data was analyzed by me.

In summation, safety, confidentiality, anonymity and the ethical considerations of my participants was paramount to me; this study was conducted with respect and integrity for all. Participants could have removed themselves from the study at any time if they no longer wanted to participate or found value in what they were doing. There were no consequences to any participant should they withdraw. Respect for participants was upheld and understanding the phenomenon of the meaning of school choice was personal, though not often known or sought to be understood, thus participant voices, in chapter four, were heard and analyzed for the multimeanings of parental school choice.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS: THE STORY BEHIND THE DATA

As an individual who wondered what meaning school choice had for parents, who chose specific public schools for their child(ren), this research sought to understand the essence of the deeper meanings of parental choice. Without knowing why parents chose a school and what that choice meant to them school leadership may never fully capture relevant and personal data that may have transferability of understanding, or tidbits of knowledge to be used in decisions making that could influence others to choose their particular school or district. An understanding of the influences and meanings of parental school choice could alter school and district practices, to even include policy implications. It is in naiveté that educators are not able to improve policies and practices, thus a problem and a need existed. To date, there was very little research on this topic, thus this research would contribute to a sparse field to enlighten school leaders, with possible ramifications for district practices and policies. As a result of this study, it is my hope that someone will read the research findings and replicate the study or initiate a new inquiry based on the findings. Most research on school choice referenced the type of school chosen, sidestepping the deeper experiences and resulting feelings and emotions related to the meaning of choice; what ultimately drove parents in their decisions. Other than research conducted by Jennifer Holme (2002), I was unable to locate additional research on the phenomenon of meanings for parental choice. Hence, the purpose of this study was to seek the essence of the meaning of parental choice. Research questions for this study were:

Central Question One: What are the meanings of school choice for parents?
Sub-questions:

1. How do parents define school choice?
2. What experiences do parents attribute to their meanings of school choice?
3. How do parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children?

Central Question Two: What resources do parents use to develop meanings about school choice?

Sub-questions:

1. What resources do parents ascribe to, to construct their meanings of school choice?
2. To what social and economic resources do parents ascribe to conduct their meanings of school choice?

This was a single-case qualitative study that integrated traditions of narrative, phenomenological, and case study to understand the meanings of parental choice for parents who chose a mid-sized, Midwestern, suburban public school. The narrative, phenomenological case study was a good fit for this research as it allowed an opportunity to become closer to the phenomenon of school choice. Phenomenology permitted me to gather rich, thick data that sought the essence of each participant’s perspectives on the meaning of choice. Narratology, being both a process and product, provided access to each participant’s unique stories that embraced their experiences and social/cultural influence on the meanings of choice. Without these stories, the richness of this study would be lacking. The embedded case or within case study provided a methodology to view each case separately and then look for common themes and patterns across cases, as well as unique observations. These
traditions seemed the best methods to capture the essence of school choice from an emic approach. Purposeful and criterion sampling were utilized to identify families who have experience with parental choice and currently have children enrolled in a specific middle school of their selected to promote quality assurance. Purposeful, criterion sampling helped to “achieve a better understanding of the central phenomenon, researchers intentionally select particular participants and sites” (Giaimo-Ballard & Hyatt, 2012, p. 3), thus meeting a specific requirement.

**Participants and Setting**

Five Caucasian females, representing two parent homes and encompassing regular education, special education, and gifted education students, who attended a parent-selected Midwestern middle school in a specific district, participated in research conducted over three months. The study sought to obtain a culturally diversified participant group, however the participants ended up being only diversified by their income, educational level obtained, number of children they had, as well as services the students benefited from at school. According to 2013 enrollment data, purported on the state department website, the district is largely White, non-Hispanic. There were 2,938 Caucasian students enrolled, K-12, which equated to 79.10% of the student population; there were 70 Asian students, 330 Black students, 264 Hispanic students and only 4 Indian students. Although the district has become more diversified over the years, with the large majority of families being White, perhaps that is why parents, who knew other parents that practiced school choice, were Caucasian. No fathers were involved in the research; all were mothers of children in this particular middle school. Some of the mothers had made comments such as “can I just do this research, my
husband is busy” or the husband was in the armed services and not available. Other participants did not mention their spouse and I did not question their non-involvement in the research. All participants had children who have been in the district for two or more years and English was their only language spoken. The educational level attained by my participants included one that held a high school diploma, two had college degrees, and two held Master’s degrees. The annual income of participants ranged from $50,000.00 to over $100,000.00. Paperwork to volunteer for the study was submitted to the middle school office by two participants and three participants were found through snowball sampling, which then turned in their consent to participate forms at our first face-to-face meeting. One hundred percent of the parents who submitted consent forms to the school office were selected and met the criteria, as well as those who were discovered through referrals of parents who participated in school choice and who also participated in this study. Snowball sampling occurred by asking those who volunteered if they knew of others parents, in this particular middle school, that met the criteria for this study and might want to participate. According to Biernacki and Waldorf (1981):

Snowball or chain referral sampling is a method that has been widely used in qualitative sociological research. The method yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest. (p. 141)

Often it took just a call, text, or email by a parent who had volunteered for this study, to another parent who they knew participated in school choice, and I had another parent consenting to participate in the study. It was discovered however, that by using snowball sampling participants recruited people like them; it decreased the diversity of the population that participated in the study.
Data Sources

During the data collection all five parents completed an open-ended survey, a narrative, and participated in two interviews with the researcher. Surveys and the narrative were turned in before, at the first interview, or emailed electronically to me. Participants turned them in the method that was easiest for them. Throughout the research phase, I attempted to be as accommodating as possible with all participants. The intent of the open-ended survey was to capture background information about the parent participants, their families, resources their children utilized in school, and to garner characteristics about this particular district/school that were meaningful and led to their selection. I wanted to expand on how the opportunity to choose this particular district/school was meaningful to them (see Appendix B). The narrative prompt elicited from participants how they defined and perceived school choice and beliefs that they attributed to their formations of meaning. They described the meaning of choice and how they used these meanings to make decisions about district/school selection (see Appendix C). Interviews occurred in various settings, based on methods and locations most convenient for the participants; participant’s home, researcher’s office, participant’s office, local public library, and via the internet. In the first interview I used the interview guide (see Appendix D) to ask semi-structured interview questions with contextualized follow-up questions. All participants also participated in a second interview. The questions for this interview were derived from participant’s answers given in the first interview. This provided an opportunity to clarify participants’ thoughts, ideas, meanings, as well as asked questions that stemmed from something the participant said in the initial interview. Interviews occurred early in the morning before students were at school, during a
child’s naptime at a parent’s home, after work for another parent, during a teacher’s break, and during work breaks for another parent. Interviews ranged from forty-five to sixty minutes in length. It should be noted time was also spent texting or emailing participants, throughout the research process, concerning various questions, or in requesting them to review scripts from interviews, to let me know of any changes needed, which validated collected information.

My own frame of mind when beginning to work with participants was one of openness and eagerness. I truly wanted to extract and understand the essence of what school choice meant to parents, the resources they used to make choice decisions, and if they were happy with their decisions. I deliberately epoched my own ideas and listened with an open mind to learn from their beliefs, values and ideals that school choice held for each of them. Reflexivity was also part of this research: as the research instrument. I was aware of the propensity to influence participants and for them to influence me as well though I truly did try to minimize any influence I may inadvertently have had on the participants. During my research, I came to know my participants as very busy parents and when left to write about their thoughts they were brief; I am sure due to the multitasking they were engaged in, though I never pointedly asked the question.

Before conducting this research, I knew two of the parent participants and three were complete strangers when we began the process. As the research evolved I found the participants very accommodating and after the data was collected I felt we left as new friends, or better understood friends with a deep appreciation for the meaning education held for each one of them. While collecting data my relationship with the five individuals changed. As I read their surveys, narratives, and interviewed them, I began to understand
their life stories and who they were as individuals, families, parents, and often sons or daughters to their parents. Our relationships moved from respectful colleagues to strong rapport; I viewed participants as complex individuals with strong beliefs, values, and ethics. I developed a deeper level of respect for them as human beings who wanted the best for their children. The participants were forthright, honest, and sincere; as interview questions proceeded I felt that the participants became increasingly more comfortable sharing. I also learned that although very different, these parents were homogenous in their beliefs that parents should choose the schools their children attend: an important act that meant everything to them. Two of the participants stated during interviews that they believed school choice was increasing. When asked what they based this on the answer included their peer social groups increasingly made school choice decisions. Throughout the process I learned that all but one of my participants worked outside the home and one held two jobs. During the interview sessions I learned that each person was very unique concerning the personal experiences they drew upon which impacted their meanings and actions taken on behalf of school choice; however, I also discovered patterns of common themes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed based on the appropriate traditions methodology; personal documents and survey (open coding) and interviews (phenomenology). Open-ended questions in both the survey and narrative response elicited narratives, or stories from the participant’s lived experiences that helped to understand the essence of their meanings of school choice. The participant’s personal answers to questions sought to answer the first central and subquestions of this study: What are the meanings of choice for parents. Personal
stories, written by three participants, provided a context upon which to understand the sources, values, and experiences from which parents drew their meanings and perceptions of parental choice. Narrative documents “give insight into how individuals structured communication for effect and how they construct meaning from their life experiences” (Grbich, 2013, p. 217); they provide a detailed, contextualized story. According to Patton (2002) narrative “honors people’s stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience” (p. 115). Word choices and descriptions of lived experiences, with rich details, proved very powerful in capturing the essence of meanings. According to Riessman (2002), “The ‘truths’ of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future” (p. 42). A thematic narrative analysis approach was used through open coding of participants’ responses to open-ended question on the survey and the narrative prompts. I looked for patterns and themes threaded from the context of both data sources, labeled as descriptive codes and interpretative codes, to form themes. Although narratology does not have a lock-step method for analysis, the following steps were taken: 1) determined if narrative problem or question best fit narrative research; 2) selected five individuals who met the criterion of the research to share information concerning the phenomenon and collected data in two different ways; open ended survey and narrative prompt; 3) collected information about the context of their stories; and 4) analyzed the stories looking for patterns and themes. Participants were actively involved in the research. For the survey and narrative responses I assigned codes used to describe words or phrases, for each person’s information.
These codes were called descriptive codes. Miles and Huberman (1994) said, “…codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p. 56). I then assigned a definition to each descriptive code and looked for patterns concerning how the codes related. Open coding was the strategy utilized to capture the patterns and themes that became apparent. Open coding referred to “firstly examining the data leading to categorization and labeling of the phenomenon that derive from the data” (Zafeiriou, Nunes, & Ford, 2001, p. 85). Boeije (2002) reported this about open coding:

In the process of open coding, every passage of the interview is studied to determine what exactly has been said and to label each passage with an adequate code. By comparing different parts of the interview, the consistency of the interview as a whole is examined. (p. 359)

First I read each participant’s papers, thought about their responses, and wrote my reactions to them in a reflection journal. I then began coding important words or phrases that seemed central to the data and phenomenon being studied. I did not begin with a “start list” but preferred to allow the data to speak to me. After I coded each document I gave each descriptive code a definition and then went back and counted the frequency in which the code appeared in each document. Next, interpretative codes were grouped from the descriptive codes and finally themes were formed from the clustering or categorizing of interpretative codes. This process was conducted for each survey and narrative and then repeated again for all responses guided by a code book for managing data and forming themes. Within case and across, case analysis of the data contributed to the individual and common meanings of choice for the single case. Thus, a within and across case analysis proved to help compare/contrast themes. Triangulation of the multiple data sources
strengthened the validity and reliability of research findings. What I appreciated about the
analysis of this study is that it was straightforward and simplistic to implement and
understand. Miles and Huberman (1994) reminded me that “the creation, testing, and revision
of simple, practical, and effective analysis methods remain the highest priority for qualitative
researchers” (p. 3). Throughout data analysis participants remained anonymous in the reports
and researcher reflections were noted.

Next I applied the transcendental phenomenological analysis process to the individual
interviews and then compared results across interviews, as outlined in the methodology.
Central question two and subsequent questions were the focus of the guided interviews and
follow-up interviews that were recorded and transcribed with participants reading the
transcriptions and providing any changes needed to the scripts; adding a layer of validity and
reliability. I embraced member checking as a tool to validate information, which in turn,
provided more confidence in the use of collected data. Likewise each participant was emailed
the horizontalizing, textured description and textural-structural description and was asked to
provide their feedback of what was written. Four of the five participants provided feedback
on the textural-structural information. I assigned participant pseudonyms, to ensure
confidentiality throughout the study.

In continuing the sequential layout of this dissertation I first reported findings for
surveys and narratives follow by in-depth interviews, which for phenomenological studies
are the major sources of data, and conclude with answering the research questions using all
data sources which support triangulation and crystallization. Tracy (2010) described
crystallization as “a term that relates to the practices of using multiple data sources,
researchers, and lenses- but is motivated by poststructural and performance assumptions” (p.
This means that single data sets were viewed from multiple perspectives to reveal meanings from the data.

Findings: Surveys and Narratives (Documents)

Two themes most prevalent from all the narratives and surveys were “choice” and “resources” (see Table 3). Choice is defined as the ability, or opportunity, to make a decision, in this context, on school selection for a child or children. Choice was extricated from the interpretive code “selection of school”; which represented common descriptive codes of why parents chose a particular school for their child(ren). Resources were defined as the varied sources of knowledge upon which one sought to make a decision. The theme resources was taken from the interpretive code of “sources of knowledge.”

Table 3


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Maria</td>
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<td>Penny</td>
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<td>Liz</td>
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Choice

The prerogative of parents to choose, or “choice” was cited most often in the participant’s responses as utmost important in their meaning of choice. What school choice meant to parents is central question one in this research. Choice provided parents with a means to enroll their children in the school, or district of choice, that provided the best education, atmosphere, culture, and extracurricular opportunities that matched their values, beliefs, and wishes. According to Penny, “school choice I believe is a set of criteria or values that you are looking for when looking at prospective schools.” Penny continued to say:

Choice to me means evaluating and weighing all of your options, choices, values, and opinions of others near and around you when look at prospective schools and consider your children’s feeling and likes/dislikes into the factoring of your ultimate decision.

Maria commented that choice meant, “having the free will to make a selection from options presented to you. One’s choice will then be determined by a multitude of variables and constants that best meets their needs.” Liz commented that school choice is not all based on facts or from opinions of others; “I believe in choices and sometimes you just have to trust your gut. As a nurse I rely on my gut, if something doesn’t feel right, more than likely it’s not.” Liz also said that “I believe in informed decisions, and it is the parents’ responsibility to learn about the school district.” Active parent involvement, prior to school choice selection, was clearly evident in these participant’s written responses. How parents defined school choice was as unique as each of them. Eva indicated that school choice for her was “the ability to choose where to send your kids to school based on things you/your family deem important.” Mary defined school choice as, “parents’ choice of where they want their children to go.” Some of the parents relocated to this district before their children were
school aged, while others moved here when their children were school age. Defining school choice answered the first subquestion under central question one. In trying to understand how the meaning and definition of school choice came to be I asked the participants what experiences they attributed to their meanings of school choice. As you can imagine personal experiences were shared. Mary said that “my parents chose the house first then the school and we weren’t involved. We chose our children’s school- researched and made connections to school through research.” Eva mentioned watching her grandmother’s and teacher’s experiences contributed to her meaning of school choice. “Watching my grandmother interact with students, even receiving calls at home. Watching my 4th grade teacher with her family.”

**Value**

Value was the second most cited reason for what school choice meant to parents. Value was defined as what one deemed as important and it answered the third subquestion under central question one: How did parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children? Parents spoke about academics, academic support, extracurricular offerings, technology rich environments, and an atmosphere and culture where students were known by name that they valued about this district. Eva shared, “I was able to get my son into a school that had a “reasonable” class size; I didn’t want him swallowed up in a large school. I feel like I have an easier connection to his teachers.”
Academics

The third area most cited by parents was academics. Seeking academic achievement is nothing new, according to Barton and Coley (2011):

In 1893, a dispute on what was to be taught to whom was settled, to a degree, by the Committee of Ten, a commission headed by Charles Eliot, President of Harvard College. Students should all study the same thing – a college-focused curriculum said the committee, no matter what their post-school ambitions and objects. (p. 6)

Educational quality was thought to be important or very important by a higher percentage of respondents than any of the other factors in every race and income grouping (Kleitz et al., 2000, p. 850). Teske and Schneider’s (2001) empirical research also supported the notion of academic achievement as a motivator for choice; “Despite these differences, almost all studies of public school choice find that most parents say that academic programs and high performance motivate their choices” (p. 613). Maria said:

I have chosen what I feel is the best opportunity for my child to get a ‘quality’ education where, I pray, that the education piece is not hindered by social issues indicative of large metro schools and/or become a political pawn.

Lastly, there was a pattern of similar statements that showcased the importance of how school choice, personal values, and academics all tie together that provided meaning for school choice; “we chose our children’s schools”, “deciding what’s best for your family”, and “meets one’s expectations for their child’s educational needs.” Mary indicated:

If I get to choose my school that means I get to find the aspects of the school that matches the values of my home – good academics- trends current to society- school culture- are my children going to feel happy and comfortable here?

Thus…weight must be given to parents’ views on and choices of education (Belfeld & Levin, 2005, p. 556).
Resources

The survey and narrative data also brought another theme to light: resources. Resources were defined as the multiple sources of knowledge from which parents obtained information and generated meaning for choice concerning their school of choice. Parents cited looking at school district data, such as graduation rate, class size, test scores, size of school district, accreditation, extracurricular opportunities, academic opportunities (especially in the high school), and a feel for the culture of the schools through what was posted on school websites. Parents also viewed the state department of education website and compared their district of choice data with other district’s achievement level data. Maria shared:

I looked at accreditation scores, enrollment, community, extracurricular activities, graduation rates, schools grade card compared to state expectations. Using these criteria and the areas what were around the metro area- north of the river; the districts that met most or all of the criteria made the cut.

Maria then looked at the top two and probed the two districts more using the same variables. Liz summed it up as “choices, choices, choices.” Findings from the semi-structure phenomenological interviews mirror similar meanings.

Findings: In-depth Semi-Structured Phenomenological Interviews

In this section, I used the steps of phenomenological analysis to report findings. To demonstrate the process, the reports of two participants were used for each step, thus one individual will be repeated: 1) individual textural description (Mary and Maria), b) individual structural description (Penny and Maria), and c) individual textural-structural description (Liz and Eva). This particular method permitted the structure to illustrate the process and to
showcase the experiences of the participants. Phenomenological analysis looked not only at individual meaning, but also what the phenomenon meant for the group. There were three group reports that highlight these findings; 1) composite textural description, 2) composite structural description, and 3) composite textural structural description. The composite textural structural description, which combined the textural (what) with the structural (how) was the final report.

Individual textural descriptions took a while to write and they were approximately 2-8 pages for each participant. As a first step of the transcendental phenomenological analysis model I bracketed, or epoched, my personal bias so I could be open to the natural experiences. Creswell (2013) described bracketing as “in which investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination” (p. 80). Next I employed phenomenological reduction. According to Moustakas (1994), “In the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself.” (p. 34). Descriptions are written completely, wholly, so others can see them for what they are in new ways. Structural portrayals did not take as long, as by then I understood the methodology better and looked to understand “how” the phenomenon was experienced. It was during this time that I used imaginative variation. Moustakas (1994) described the function of imaginative variation; “its aim is to grasp the structural essences of experiences” (p. 35). The imaginative variation required me to use my mind’s eye to visualize what the experience must have been like for the participants. This then led to the structural description of the essence of the experience. Meaning units, or themes, were pulled from the participant descriptions.
Writing composite reports was a daunting task with constant reflection used to gather meaning. The composite-textural focused on the “what” for the group, not for the individual. This process required me to bracket my own ideas and values and have a tunnel-like focus so I could create meaning for the group. The composite textural and composite structural reports were used to develop the final report; composite textural structural experiences.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants who have experience with the phenomenon of school choice. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure each participant was asked the same questions, yet there was flexibility to ask other questions. Each participant also participated in a follow-up interview. As I presented data, I used the actual words of the participants, allowing others to fully immerse themselves in another’s world and experience the essence of their experience. Again, pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of each participant.

Individual Textual Description

Mary: Individual Textural Description

A mid-aged, Caucasian, married woman, Mary was an educator who recently completed her Master’s degree. She resides in the district of choice with her husband of 17 years and her two children, a 7th grader and a 10th grader. Mary had one child in gifted education. English was the only language spoken in their home. Mary’s family had moved often due to her husband being in the military.

Phenomenon. With a military move to a nearby command post, Mary and her husband viewed test score data for the school district of choice. “I hate it when schools are
driven by tests and test scores, but you will see the product of schools and what kind of students they produce, so that was definitely part of it.” When understanding the essence of the meaning of school choice for Mary she said, “It means everything- it means my husband and I get to research and choose the very best for our children, we aren’t told “this is where you have to go.” Mary shared that what she and her husband were looking for, that held meaning for her family, included: “rigorous curriculum, engaging and caring teachers, extracurricular activities.” There were specific traits and values Mary wanted for her children:

I want my children to get the very best education possible that will allow them to be successful and competitive in their futures. I also want my children to form great friendships with other well-rounded, respectful children from the same district, gain in the same important values I believe in.

Mary talked about culture and character education values and beliefs that were important and meaningful for her; criteria she wanted in her children’s school of choice to have:

I think it [beliefs/values] kinda goes along with parents, you know, doing their own research to pick schools that does meet their own needs. So if I have certain beliefs, let’s say, in bullying or you know having a no tolerance for that, I’m going to find a school that really advocates for that. So, that would be some of the points that I would pick, or have in the forefront when picking a school.

Culture of the school/district stood out as a value for Mary and her family, but she also talked about a warm feeling she felt from her school of choice and the size of the district was appealing. This was an interesting phenomenon since both she and her husband actually grew-up in a neighboring school district but she did not choose that district for her own children to attend:

I’m from [named town], I graduated from there but we didn’t choose that school. You know it’s my husband’s al ma mater, but, um, it just didn’t compare with the school
here. We just really felt a warm, welcoming environment, that’s my personal experiences.

As the researcher I gathered that school choice meant that Mary could research the district, choose a district with a lot to offer (competitive curriculum, current standards, technology rich environment), yet with a small town feel, and provide the very best education for her children that would enable them to be successful and competitive in their future endeavors. The district they chose also meant that they felt comfortable with the teachers and hoped their children would develop respectful friends with similar values and ideals. I shared this interpretation with Mary and asked her for her feedback, this is what Mary wrote:

What I mean about school choice is that I make the decision about where my children go to school. Plain and simple. I want to be able to decide what the best school for my children is. Personally I look at small classroom settings, small-town feel, but cutting edge technology and competitive curriculum is key as well. I want to feel comfortable with the environment the school has developed for their students. Is it safe? Do they have a no tolerance policy? Are they developing curriculum that competes with the best schools and producing future leaders and successful adults. It needs to be a place my children feel comfortable yet challenged.

The meaning units that expressed what the phenomenon for Mary and her family included; decision makers of school choice, academics, culture, atmosphere, small town with access to large city, and varied opportunities.

**Maria: Individual Textural Description**

Maria was a mid-aged Caucasian mother who worked outside the home and who described herself as a control freak who had obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Maria enjoyed sports, taking pictures, being outdoors, spending time with her family, values religion and is an active church member. She and her husband, of 18 years, moved to this Midwestern state in 1999 from Ohio. Their current city, which is within the attendance zone
of their school district of choice, is not the city they originally moved to. Both she and her husband chose the school district for their two boys before they were school aged; the boys were age 4 and 1 at the time. She indicated that she was very involved with her children and their activities.

**Phenomenon.** For Maria and her husband the meanings of school choice were multiple and complex, they were looking for a “package deal”, there wasn’t just one criteria that was important to express what they wanted for their two boys in their school district of choice:

We were looking for a lot of different things as far as quality teachers, the district itself was accredited, their comparison to the state was above what the state required, so it was that they took a lot of things into consideration and were doing multiple things on a positive note.

Marie shared that the values and beliefs that she used to make meaning of school choice were quality, dedication, truth, and honesty. These values were intangible so when asked how she knew her district of choice provided these for her children she said:

Well, just from information we had gotten from others about their feelings about the teachers and the quality of experience and dedication they had to the students that met that, all the information from the grade cards, ACT scores, and all the other criteria I mentioned in question one, you know, supported that quality aspect of it. There was nothing that was really a negative toward it so, um, but having that quality shows the dedication to the students and to their patrons and that, that was the goal of the school to provide a high level, high expectation for the district and for the students. Truth is in all those areas you can’t fudge the numbers. To do what they were setting out to do they were being very truthful and doing exactly what they said they were going to do and what their goals were. They were honest about that, again, showing through the quality and dedication all those things tie into one another. You can’t have one and not necessarily have all those other things we were looking for.
Quality of the educational curriculum, to quality teaching in the classroom, to partnerships among students, teachers, and parents was a common theme for Mary; in fact quality was the number one criteria she sought in her district of choice:

Quality education, you can’t substitute it if you don’t get a quality education and you are not going to know really what you can possibly achieve. So, having a good foundation of an education that was first and foremost in our minds. Again having that building block, because it is only the first, you know, 18 years of their life they are with us and that is one of the things we provide. Obviously we provide other things as far as home and food and spiritual education and those types of things. Um, I’m not a teacher so I can’t provide that quality education and we have instilled in our boys that they are going to college, or some type of after high school education, and that is very important. Not only are we teaching them the things that obviously the state requires, through the school district, but we are teaching them life lessons also. That in order for things you have to work for them. If you want a good education, just because you go to a quality district doesn’t’ mean that it is going to happen, you still have to work at it, you still have responsibilities and those types of things. So the quality education is a very big foundation underneath the spiritual for us and that is something that my husband and I both experience growing up, so that is definitely something we wanted to instill in our children as well.

During our conversations I could feel Maria’s passion for providing her boys with the best education, in what they perceived as a quality school district, in the 18 years her boys are with her. Choosing the district her children attended allowed Maria and her husband to contribute to the quality of their son’s education:

It [choosing the school district] is very important for me, I would rather be able to choose where I go, where I move as opposed to someone telling me this is where you are going and not being able to have a say in my child’s education. Again, I’m not the teacher so I can’t say that I’m going to teach them these different things and such, this allows me some feeling and sense of contribution to their education. That we were thinking of them, we were thinking of their education when we made the move here, so it wasn’t just that we wanted to be [named specific locations] or we just wanted to be in a smaller town, you know all of our decisions, since we’ve had children revolve around our family.
Thus, the meaning of school choice for Maria and her husband meant they could choose the best quality education for their boys as a gift to them for the first 18 years of their lives. It also meant they would establish roots in the community of choice so their children could build friendships for over a lifetime:

I think I mentioned it but community was one of the other things we looked at. I’ll be very honest with you, when we were looking at coming to this area from [names a community] we looked at [names 3 school districts]. Community played a big part, as well as the school’s rating. My husband and I are both from very small towns. We like that type of atmosphere. We like living close to a very large city but we still like the small town feeling.

School choice meant varied things to different people, for Maria it seemed to mean the ability to enroll her children in a district that would provide her children with a quality education that met her values of quality, dedication, truth, and honesty, in a small town atmosphere with the conveniences of living near a large city. Both she and her husband grew up in a small town school and by participating in school choice meant they could provide this same experience and atmosphere to their children. In an effort to ensure my interpretation was accurate I provided it to Maria and asked her to respond to it. Here is what Maria wrote:

The meaning of school choice for myself is the opportunity to pick the school that displays a quality education, is dedicated to the students and its community, is truthful and honest with itself and patrons about educational needs and areas of improvement. Included in school choice is the community in which the school resides. My husband and I felt that size of the community played an important role in the selection, because it is what we knew and enjoyed about our school years. Providing our sons with a quality education is very important to us as parents and being able to make that choice of school and its community is something we can control. Our life experiences play a factor in our future decisions.

It is in understanding what the meaning of school choice holds for people that we can understand what sets the district apart from others and what different attributes of the district
mean to different people. In learning more about parental school choice this Midwestern school district could reflect upon what it hears and use the information to reinforce practices or to improve practices.

**Penny: Individual Structural Description**

Penny is a 40 year old stay at home mother of a blended family who achieved a high school diploma. Penny has resided in 4 different states but has lived the longest in the Midwest. She has 4 children and her family has resided in their school district of choice for three years. Penny has one child who received special education services. She questioned if the district was the right choice for her oldest child (who ended up dropping out of high school), but is happy about her decision for her younger children who had success in school.

**Phenomenon.** When considering how the school choice occurred for Penny it really started with a bad situation at her children’s previous school district:

I think that I moved out of my district because my child was being discriminated in school. Every other week I was buying a new coat because kids were stealing my kids’ coat on purpose just because he was a White kid. My son is really white, white blonde with lighter skin than you. You know, those Black kids didn’t know how to handle it. He loves Black kids; his best friend is a Black kid. But those other Black kids, well it is different when the other kids are racist.

Penny seemed frustrated concerning how her children were being treated, but Penny was also looking for higher academic expectations from her children’s teachers:

In [names previous school district] we had teachers that we had known forever that didn’t make her do work. You know in fourth grade when we moved to this district she couldn’t do half the math problems she could do now because grandma Mrs. [named teacher] didn’t make her do it, you know.

Penny continued to explain how school choice came to be for her:
Well, I lived with my father, previously, with my three older children. When I met my finance we decided to get married and move in together and have a baby and all that. We did it the slow way and he bought the house and I was almost due and he came to [names the city the school district resides in].

Penny’s husband is a graduate of their school district of choice which seems to be the greatest reason for why they chose this district and how it came to be, however Penny did research the district:

My husband, he graduated from [names school district] here and he thought it would be a good place for us to go and have our kids be raised up in the school district; he liked the school district when he went here. And he thought that maybe they were having better growths, than say [names 2 school districts], we like their accreditation, and those things. We look at those before we moved into this district.

Overall, for Penny it was truly about escaping a district that didn’t match the values she had for her children as well as where her husband graduated from:

I suppose I relied heavily on my husband. He has gone to school here and that was really our deciding factor on where he wanted to raise our kids. Like I said, I needed a school district that had a little bit more of a stricter do your homework policy.

How school choice came to be for one parent was different than for another. According to collected information Penny and her husband enrolled their children in the district of choice and, for their oldest child the parent felt as though the school district sided with a senior who they wanted to graduate instead of listening to her son. She thought there was more the district could have done to help her oldest child and that her oldest child had not gotten past his experiences from the last district that together made him want to stop attending school and ended up dropping out. Her younger children were receiving assistance in areas where they need academic support and she thought they were making good academic progress. She was proud of their accomplishments and believed the district had been a good
choice for them. She does worry about high school and does not want her younger children to have the same experiences as her older child. I emailed Penny and asked for her reflections on this but did not receive a reply. Now, let’s look at how it came to be for Maria.

Maria: Individual Structural Description

A description of Maria was given prior; below is how school choice meaning was developed for Maria. Maria’s first experience with school choice was as a teenager herself. She recalled that:

I know my dad, in the process of my education, and my sister’s education, time at home turned down many job offers to move other places because he wanted us to be able to stay there and have a good solid foundation knowing at times the ages that we were, that some of those things were coming up and could be a volatile age. Just with what was going on, whether it was middle school or high school, elementary really not so much, but you know as the kids get older situations get more complicated and influences can play a big part in it, so that was one thing that he wanted to ensure that we had a very solid, firm, grounding into everything and not exposing us to potential situations that could, you know, could be detrimental to us, the family, or our education. So, that is where I first experienced all that and you know when my husband and I started having kids it just is one of those things you don’t stop to really think about until you are put into that situation.

Once Maria had a family she and her husband began to consider their life experience and what they wanted in a school district that would be educating their children:

You know, um we lived in the [named school district] area and before my son, my oldest one was even pre-K they were talking about expanding their school district and everything else, building more schools, and not that [named school district] was a bad school district, but one of those other things is that we both were form a small town and we like that kind of atmosphere. We knew everybody we graduated with and those were things we enjoyed about our school years so we wanted, if we could provide that to our children, we wanted to do that also.

Eva: Individual Textural-Structural Description
Eva is a mid-aged Caucasian working mother of three children who had earned her Master’s degree, plus additional hours of college credit, and whom had been a child in gifted education herself. She was an educator of almost 20 years and comes from a background of teachers. When she and her husband chose this district their children were in fourth grade, second and preschool. Eva had one child in the gifted education program.

**Phenomenon**

Family values and a social base underscored what school choice meant to Eva. She defined school choice as, “…that opportunity that we have to make decisions based on our family values and what is important to us for where our children attend school.” Eva mentioned several values through the interview that emphasized what the meaning of school choice meant for her. More than once, Eva mentioned the value of the size of the district and the relationships with her children and family; choosing this district meant her children would be known for who they are yet still large enough to capitalize on various opportunities:

> For me, I think, to me connections are important. So I want; I definitely don’t want my kids to just be a number, wherever that is. And I think that can be achieved at all different size of schools, but more easily achieved in a smaller sized school. So I think that was definitely something that influenced us. I vividly recall growing up and my grandmother taking phone calls from students and her willingness to help those kids and her connections with those kids meant a lot. And then many years later when she passed away many of those former students attended her funeral and shared stories and stuff about how [names their previous teacher] had affected their life. I think that to me showed the importance of what good teachers do.

Eva spoke of how significant a social base was for her children, educating the whole child and developing relationships in a district where her kids would feel comfortable, gave meaning to her school choice:
I think we all gravitate toward people that are like us in many respects, and so wanting to be sure to surround my children with, not only an educational base, but a friend base, a social base. A social base because those two things for me are wrapped very tightly because those people we become friends with are also the same friends, people that push us educationally. And so I want to see that, I want to see them in a situation where they are going to have those associations that do pair together in a positive direction.

Lastly, the right educational “fit” was deemed important in Eva’s decision of school choice selection. Eva understood her children are uniquely special and talented in their individualistic ways. She searched for a district where she thought her children would be challenged academically and loved for who they are; again the tightly woven fabric of academia and relationship; her values were what gave meaning to school choice for her and her family:

I didn’t really have a horrible childhood, but here were definite elements of family and stability that I didn’t have and craved. I think that I had teachers along the way that helped fill that void, so I look for an atmosphere where my children will be treated like family. My children are very different academically, and I was appreciative of the administrators that I spoke with about placing my children in classrooms that would be good academic fits for them. One could read going into kindergarten, where another struggled and was put in a Title 1 reading program for a year.

For Eva, the medium sized district, large enough for varied opportunities, but moderate enough for small class sizes, where her children can be known by name and pushed to excel, gave her meaning and ultimately made this her district of choice.

There was no scientific approach to how Eva came to choose this district; rather she drew from upbringing, her social base of friends, family, and colleagues, with a little research about the district on their webpages:

Well, since social and friendships and people are very important to me, it is obviously a huge base. I think I reach out to people immediately when looking to making a decision to find out what they know about districts, what their resources were, again
we are involved with the military and so [names city] is close to [names military base], and they have a school liaison at [names military base], that knows a lot about surrounding schools and that kinda thing so they are good people to reach out to as well.

There were specific groups of people that were influential in her family’s decision to choose this particular district for her children:

…I think talking to parents who have children in the district is incredibly important. I think being a teacher I have been fortunate to have connections in lots of places so I can find out from the teachers the inside of it; because sometimes I think things look really good from the outside but that doesn’t mean that what is happening on the inside is always what you want.

Lastly, Eva shared that life experiences aided how they came to choose this district based on what was important to them:

I think a lot of it just comes from your background; that you don’t really consciously think about it at first. As you go through the process you think back to things in your life that worked well for you, or didn’t work well for you, and you want at least that, or better, for your children so you look for those opportunities that will be the best for them and fit in with your values and what is important.

Many value-based decisions guided Eva and her husband to choose this district; it was not one particular event or challenge that led to the decision, but multiple factors that they were looking for that worked in concert to provide that tightly woven support system for her children. My interpretation of Eva’s responses, as the researcher, is that she chose a school district for her children that met both their differentiated educational learning needs, but also provided a stable friend/teacher base upon which to raise her children; “it takes a village” approach. This approach for her enabled it to feel like a family; each other caring for one another’s youth. She sought a district that was medium sized; small enough that people knew first-hand who her children and family are, but large enough to offer an assortment of
education and extracurricular opportunities smaller districts cannot. When I shared my interpretation with Eva she mostly agreed but added this:

I think your interpretation looks pretty good, only thing I might add is that a person's social group is the same one that they will mold themselves to so I want them with a social group that will encourage them to be good people and push them academically.

Eva seemed very pleased with her school choice decision; recently she and her family were relocated to another state due to her husband’s military service, it is there that she employed the same “look fors” in her new school of choice for her children. As a mother who cares deeply for her children’s education, she equally values the relationships they develop and the influences teachers, friends, and social acquaintances have upon her children. It is in this vein that Eva carefully practiced school choice.

**Liz: Individual Textural-Structural Description**

**Phenomenon.** Liz is a mid-aged Caucasian mother of three children who worked two jobs outside the home and who had a college degree. Liz had one son who has already graduated high school, a sophomore girl, and a sixth grade son. Liz and her husband purposely moved into the district boundaries two years ago and seem pleased with their school choice decision.

According to Liz school choice meant that it’s “a parent’s right to choose schools based on their individual needs for their children.” What meaning that holds for Liz boils down to, in her words, “choices, choices, choices.” Liz used her values as a foundation for choice but relied on facts to help make decisions. Liz used the principles of knowledge, economics, time, and family to guide her decision making and those, in turn, also expressed her meaning of school choice. Knowledge represented the academic expectations she had for
her children and the district she chose, economics meant they could save money attending this public school district, and it also meant they would have more time together and family was extremely important. “I researched the district so I knew what they offered. By moving to [named school district] we could save a lot of money and have more time to spend with our children.” Prior to choosing this Mid-Western school district Liz’s children attended a rural public school.

How meaning came to be for Liz happened when they were looking for a district that afforded their children a good education, save them time and money, and provide more time for the family to be together. However the decision was not formed solely by that, Liz asked others for feedback on the district. Liz commented on the influence of friends and family and how what they shared had meaning and influence on their school choice selection. “The school district was highly recommended by my friends. I liked that there are many academic choices for my children. My children are also athletic and [names school district] had many opportunities for them.” What her friends specifically shared with Liz about the district is that; “The majority of my friends said that the teachers cared about their children. They also told me the school district had a lot of opportunities for growth.” Listening to others helped Liz to gather first-hand information, from participants in the school district that would not be found on websites. “I listened to what they had to say and formed my opinions and made my own decisions for my children’s futures.” Another factor that impacted how Liz made school choice decisions was the data that was available on the school district website:

I looked at the school district curriculum, graduation rate, resources for students, extracurricular activities, and recommendations from friends and family. I like reading and hearing others ideas, it helps me to see things in different and new ways. Then I make lists and make decisions that I feel are best for myself and family.
As the researcher I gathered that the meaning of school choice meant Liz could research and review what the district offered and compared it to the individual needs of her children. By choosing this district the family could save money, have more time together as a family, and still provide her children with a good education. I shared this perspective with Liz and asked for her feedback, she emailed the following:

Yes, I like how you interpreted my thoughts, it sounds good. Thanks!

Individual textural and structural experiences elicited an authentic, individualistic participant conception of what school choice meant and how experiences and values played a part in both meaning and ultimate school choice decisions. It was the essence of what parents valued and the importance meaning played, as an integral part of choice decision making, that school districts could begin to look at the criteria parents used. Exactly what the meaning of choice held for parents, how it came to be, and identification of resources utilized to evaluate district practices were data districts could use to garner a greater understanding of what matters to the public they serve when it comes to educating their children. Educational leaders should take heed of participant’s feedback; as districts partner with their communities they must seek an understanding of community needs and wants. This research identified not only specific criteria parents were searching for, and where they obtained information to determine the district met their needs and aligned with their educational values, but also the importance of relationships. As districts periodically present bond/levy ballot items to their communities to foster educational improvements, district leaders should warrant the importance of understanding what meaning school choice has for their parents. Parents have choices concerning where to educate their child(ren), districts will want to provide an
education that meets the standards of criteria parents are using when selecting a quality educational institution for their children.

**Composite Textural/Structural Description: The Essences of the Experience**

In this chapter, two meaning units emerged as I pursued the participant’s meanings of school choice (see Table 4). The themes: 1) choice actualization, and 2) alignment with beliefs and values represented the voices of parents in this research study. First I discussed each meaning unit and then, in the summary, addressed the answer to each of the sub-questions in this research.

Table 4

*Themes from the interviews November, 2013-January, 2014*

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<th>Choice Actualization</th>
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Choice Actualization

Being the decision maker and exercising their free right to choose and enroll their children in their district/school of choice seemed to be what mattered most; choice actualization held meaning for parents. Choice was defined as one’s ability to choose. As Mary stated:

What I mean about school choice is that I make the decision about where my children go to school; plain and simple. I want to be able to decide what the best school for my children is.

Empirical research on school choice was divided into two policy camps. According to Powers and Cookson (1999):

On the one hand is a loose coalition of business groups, market theorists, policy advocates, religious groups, and entrepreneurs who believe that the public school establishment is monolithic, rigid, unaccountable, and failing America’s children. For members of this coalition, market-driven choice will usher in a series of positive changes at the individual and institutional levels (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Finn, Manno, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1997; Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Moe, 1995). Students and parents, unhappy with the existing system of public education—which is often characterized as a monopoly—will not only be more satisfied with chosen schools, but students will also experience gains in academic achievement (Chubb, 1988; Viteritti, 1996). (p. 105)

Parent’s in this research study were not shy about sharing that school choice really is about directing the educational, extracurricular, social, culture, and community influences their children would have and so for them, starting their children’s education, or restarting an educational endeavor in a new district meant parents had some control over their child’s education. Research on parents who chose their child(ren)’s school stated that they will be satisfied with their school of choice because they have exercised their right to choose (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Sheffield, 2012; Powers & Cookson,
The parents I interviewed searched for a specific type of district (medium sized, public) and sought a quality education for their children; the most noted reason for choosing this district. The primary stated motivation for school choice, in all types of choice, was perceived academic quality (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Jacobs, 2011). Selection of school choice, for the participants in this study, were highly motivated to choose a district based on the extracurricular opportunities, teacher-student relationships, special services, curriculum, technology, class size, graduation rate, culture (atmosphere), character education program, and community within which the district resided. These were important to note, as they all carried different weight in meaning for the parents and were sighted as reasons for choice. Research indicated that parents choosing schools are seeking academic programs and high student performance. Teske and Schneider (2001) reported the following:

Armor and Peiser (1998) find that Massachusetts parents report choosing a school in a different district because they seek, in order: high standards, curriculum, facilities, safety, small size, and good teachers. In Milwaukee, Witte (2000) shows that high academic standards, good teachers, and other academic factors are important to low-income parents who choose schools. Goldring (1997) finds that parents in Cincinnati chose magnet schools mainly on the basis of academic criteria. In their study of parental attitude toward charter schools, Vanourek and colleagues (1998, pp. 198–199) found that parents generally (as well as parents in the lowest-third of the income distribution) choose charter schools because they seek: small size, higher standards, program closer to parental educational philosophy, greater opportunity for involvement, and better teachers. (p. 613)

Liz said school choice to her meant, “A parent’s right to choose schools based on their individual needs for their children.” Penny also contributed to this and said:

It means a lot to me as I get to look at the different school districts around to decide what school district I think would be best suited for my kids when I moved into this school district.
Though participants who practiced school choice were selected based on specific criteria for this research, not everyone in the United States believes in school choice. Those opposing school choice; teachers unions, school boards, school administrators, and some policy advocates, see education as an equal opportunity for all and a cornerstone of democracy. According to Powers and Cookson (1995):

Although they often agree that parents and students are more satisfied with chosen schools, they also note that the evidence for achievement gains as a result of choice is less clear. For some, what are at best minimal achievement gains may come at the cost of increasing stratification within the educational system; the positive effects of participating in choice programs for individual students have to be balanced against the possible negative effects of choice on a school district. (Witte, 1996a)

Thus, although empirical research showcased two sides of the choice debate, the essence of this research concerned the multi meanings of parent school choice and resources that were utilized for choice decision making. The meaning of school choice, for these specific parent participants has been narrowed down to the meaning unit of choice actualization. Parents value having the power to choose the district/school that they feel will best provide and meet their child(ren)’s needs and that, in itself, means everything to them.

**Alignment with Beliefs and Values**

Parent values and beliefs made up the backbone from which the meaning of choice was understood. Parent participants spoke candidly concerning the impact of what their family valued and sought in educating their children and how that impacted meaning and school choice selection. In Eva’s interview she commented on the psychological process a parent goes through to determine what they are looking for in their child’s school:

As you go through the process you think back to things in your life that worked well for you, or didn’t work well for you, and you want at least that, or better, for your
children so you look for those opportunities that will be the best for them and fit in with your values and what is important.

Maria shared that they valued and chose the school district because it met and surpassed state expectations on academic data as reported on the state educational agency website. However, they also valued the establishment of “roots” in a community that was important for them as they wanted their sons to grow-up and build their friendships over the course of their kindergarten through senior year in one district. Maria said, “My husband and I both grew up in the school district that we started in. That was one of the other things that was of importance to us.” Character education values, such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, etc., was one of the values Penny noted in our conversations that she found in her school district of choice:

Well, I was looking for values from, like [names town] and their [names character education program]. How they include the community and their school and if they are proud of you they show it, even the younger people and the grade schools. The [names district character education program], that was kind of what I was looking for.

Analyzing Districts for Alignment

Participants used various methods to analyze school districts in determining that this Midwestern, mid-sized school district was their district of choice. In particular the participants mentioned seeking the opinions of family, friends, colleagues, and current parents. Maria indicated she utilized friends:

I had several friends that had children in the school district and I talked to them and wanted to get their opinions as far as what they liked about the school district, what they didn’t like…those kinda of things and took those into consideration as well.
Liz also said she asked her friends and “the school district was highly recommended by my friends.” When conducting an investigation on Google Scholar, for past research concerning how parents of choice, in general, selected their district or school, I did not find much data. However, there was one study, conducted by Bosetti (2004) in Alberta, Canada, where she sought to understand how parents chose their children’s elementary schools. The study showed:

The top three sources of information used by all parents in selecting a school were talks with friends, neighbors, and other parents; talks with teachers, principals, and/or guidance counselors; and visits to the school. What distinguishes groups is the range of resources used to inform decisions, and the degree to which their search is deliberate and rational, or more unguided and serendipitous. For example, 79% of public school parents rely on their social networks of friends, neighbors, and other parents to inform their decision, followed by talks with teachers (59%) and school visits (43%). Compared with the other groups, they are the least likely to consult with published school achievement scores (9%) or formal sources of information such as the school newsletter (3%) or media reports (3%), but they will consult with other family members (11%) and their child (25%). (p. 395)

This one study aligned with my participants’ use of family and friend relationships to help make decisions. A fear with this type of resource is that those providing information may not have correct information, or may be presenting information from one perspective of the school.

Another resource parents accessed was the school district and state department of education websites. All of the participants reviewed information published on the school district website and some of the parents looked specifically at the school their child would be attending. Eva used connections for insider information, she sought out educational colleagues that worked in the school district she was considering: “As I was making that choice, looking at the district websites and for me, probably more important is talking to
people that are in that district and know about the district.” Penny viewed educational
statistics from two different states when making a decision:

As I mentioned a few minutes ago I did go to other websites that kinda looked at
[names a state] and [names a state] schools both, you know, and that had criteria I
could look at for past test scores and things such as that, that I kinda got a feel for and
it included the class sizes when you went to the website and looked at the certain
teachers in the certain schools. It would show an average class sized on the district
website as well.

Most of the parents indicated that they had also visited the state department education
website to view how school districts in this specific region of the Midwest compared to
another. Maria was very matter-of-fact when she said:

Um, school ratings and grade cards we got off the websites had a huge play in our
choice. Education is very important to us. If the school wasn’t an “A” rating it wasn’t
even a consideration.

Published student achievement scores and other statistical information about the district were
regularly used to make school choice decisions, coupled with satisfaction information about
the district from others already residing in the community.

**Summary**

In search of the multi-meanings of parental school choice, I have come to respect
these parents for being true to their values and beliefs, along with being impressed by their
active involvement as children’s advocates, seeking what they determine as the best
education based on their ideals. Not only did they research multiple sites and ask others for
their experiences and knowledge about the district, but these parents took action and
relocated to make choice a reality.
What does this mean for school districts? Since we know parents will relocate to actualize what school choice means for them, districts should heed what parents say they are looking for and what it means; keep a district-wide focus on student achievement, small class sizes, high graduation rates and other achievement scores that indicate students are achieving at a high level of success. Along with these criteria parents’ valued personal teacher-student-parent relationships and extracurricular options for their children, in a district that is not too large or too small. Based on parental values and beliefs school choice means everything to parents and they will move to reside within districts to ensure their child(ren) receive the kind of instruction that they deem as a quality education. The theme below, and answer to research questions, sheds more light and understanding concerning specific answers to questions in this research. It will provide districts with vital information to consider for policy and practices.

**Theme and Answers to Research Questions**

From the surveys and narratives, two themes provided meaning of the phenomenon of school choice. From the interviews two themes were presented. From this study one theme was dominant: choice.

Three sub-questions were asked to address the first central question: “What are the meanings of school choice for parents?”

1. How do parents define school choice?
2. What experiences do parents attribute to their meanings of school choice?
3. How do parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children?
The first sub-question was: “How do parents define school choice?” The following responses were in answer to this question.

Choice, being defined as one’s ability to choose, was exactly what choice meant to these parents. Parents wanted to seek out and find the best education for their children in a district that meet their personal specifications for educational quality. For some of these parents it meant a good curriculum, for others, respectful individuals who would become a friendship base, yet others were looking for low class sizes, extracurricular opportunities, special assistance for students, and high graduation rates. Though many parents mentioned seeking all of these items, the search for the choice school was a personal journey, based on personal values and beliefs, somewhat on what friends, colleagues, and family members say, and yet one parent made a check list of what she wanted and, with there being no negatives, this district turned out to be the school district of choice. What parents were looking for was unique for each, but being able to choose meant everything to each of them.

The second sub-question was: “What experiences do parents attribute to their meanings of school choice?” The following responses were in reply to this question.

For Maria, she remembered her father not taking employment advances/promotions so that she and her sister could remain in the same school district to complete their high school education in an effort to protect, or avoid negative influences on the girls during a time when they may have been more vulnerable. So, in addition to a quality education, she and her husband followed in her father’s footsteps and sought a district where they could become a part of the community, specifically in a medium sized district, with the intention of not leaving so their kids could have the same experience as what she did growing-up. Maria’s fathers’ behaviors, and high regard for getting his children enrolled in one district, had
carried over to Maria’s generation and impacted her beliefs which were attributed to defining her meaning of school choice.

For Penny a negative school experience, from her children’s previous school district, gave her the impetus to seek out another district for her children and helped to determine what she sought in the next district for her children (meaning), along with beliefs and values from her then fiancé. Penny knew she pursued what her children were missing; higher expectations from her children’s teachers, resources to help her children, and a safe environment. Her fiancé liked the school district he attended as a student and thought the district could provide everything Penny wanted. Both the negative school experience and Penny’s husband’s childhood school experience attributed to defining their meaning of school choice.

Liz did not expand significantly on what contributed to her meaning of school choice other than she was looking for knowledge, economics, time, and family. Liz sought the advice of family and friends and did some research on the school district website. By moving to this particular district Liz could have more time to spend with her children; these personal ideals contributed to her meaning of school choice.

Eva’s years growing up attributed to her meaning of school choice. Elements of family and stability were something she wished she had more of when she was younger that lead to her seeking these elements for her own children. Eva sought out a district where she felt her children would be treated as family and where each child would be challenged to maximize his/her potential. As a young child Eva qualified for the gifted program and participated in those services, second through eighth grade. Now with a family of her own, she herself has a daughter that has qualified for the gifted program and she advocated for her.
She expected the same push to academically excel for her sons, although not in the gifted program, these bright young men had incredible potential. Eva also believed that who her children associated with influenced their decisions and so that too attributed to her meaning of school choice; for Eva it was multiple criteria that needed to be met.

Lastly, Mary shared that negative experiences with outdated curriculum and technology to older “wornout” teachers attributed to her search for wanting to give her children the best education that would help them be competitive in their futures. Mary was looking for a competitive curriculum, technology rich environments, and a place where her children could become well rounded and form friendships that are respectful; values she was raised with.

The third sub-question was: “How do parents use their meanings of school choice to make decisions about school selection for their own children?” The following responses are in answer to this question.

According to participants their meanings of school choice was the driving force behind what they searched for in a district and ultimately school choice decisions. For example, school choice meant, for Maria, researching districts that displayed data to support they offered a quality education, in a medium sized town, outside a large city, where their children would attend school K-12, in a stable environment, with quality teachers. How parents grow-up, their parental beliefs, or the beliefs they decided they wanted, or did not want for their children, were the elements they sought in their district of choice. As Liz indicated there were “choices, choices, choices,” and parent’s used their values, beliefs, how they were raised, what others said, and what they read from various resources to collectively
become informed and make a decision. For some parents of choice it was a tedious, methodical search, for others not so scientific, more social informationally-based.

Next, two sub-questions were asked to address the second central question: “What resources do parents use to develop meanings about school choice?”

1. What resources do parents ascribe to, to construct their meanings of school choice?

2. To what social and economic resources do parents ascribe to conduct their meanings of school choice?

The first sub-question was: “What resources do parents ascribe to, to construct their meanings of school choice?” The following responses are in answer to this question.

First, parents of school choice ascribed to their own values and beliefs; that which provided meaning and will, based on what they believed delivered the best education for their children, to construct their meanings of school choice. For some of the participants the power of reflection was a resource, awakening past experiences and opportunities that they hoped to either replicate, or not repeat, for their own children. Lastly, the parents relied on district and state educational website data, as well as feedback and opinions from others to listen to what they had to say.

The second sub-question was: “To what social and economic resources do parents ascribe to construct their meanings of school choice?” The following responses are in answer to this question.

Social resources mentioned frequently were family, friends, and colleagues. Parents asked those whom they trusted questions about the school district. Liz shared that “I like reading and hearing others ideas, it helps me to see things in different and new way” and she
also offered that, “The majority of my friends said that the teachers cared about their children. They also told me that school district had a lot of opportunities for growth.” It should be noted that some of the influential individuals are no longer living, yet what they did and how they interacted with others continued to influence meaning and choice decisions for some of these parents.

No economic resources were ascribed to, to construct meanings of school choice. One parent stated that the school district of choice would save them money, but no economic resources were utilized by any of the parents. The notion of costs inquired to actualize their choice decision never came up in any conversations. Even though these parents chose a public school it is widely known a free education does not come without some expenses. Moving into a particular district has relocation and real estate fees attached to it, yet these privileged parents did not discuss any of these burdens.

Moustakas (1994) reminded us that phenomenological studies “search for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (p. 21). The essence of the theme ‘choice’ is choice actualization; parents wanted to actively choose the school their children would attend and they sought out academic environments where students were pushed to succeed, provided resources to be successful, where social bases were established, and opportunities existed in a mid-sized district, outside a larger city. Alignment of beliefs and values was also a meaning unit for these parents; using multiple resources to analyze information and choose a district that best aligned with the values and beliefs the parents held dear to their being. Table 5 displayed all meaning units/themes. Thus findings indicated the need for school districts, and individual schools within a district, to accurately disseminate school information, not only to current school families, but those in the community. Use of
the district and local school level websites were noted; up-to-date academic, extracurricular, class size, graduation rates, ACT composite scores, academic data compared to state achievement, and other pertinent information was used to make decisions concerning school choice. By electronically sharing school district and school level data, parents have been able to learn more about the district to make informed school choice decisions. Websites and test scores were also mentioned as resources.

Table 5

*Themes from All Three Data Sources*

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So in knowing all of this, what implications and recommendations are there for district leaders and classroom teachers? Chapter 5 will address these issues in response to the essence of meanings, values, and beliefs of parents who have participated in school choice. The impact of what occurred throughout the district directly affected student achievement, district accomplishments, policy, and parental school choice.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research was to understand the essence of the meaning of parental school choice from parents in a specific mid-sized, Midwestern public middle school. The goal was to share this information with school district leaders as it could: a) to help identify why parents are making school choice decisions, b) to identify the resources parents utilized to make choice decisions, and c) to understand the attributes parents were looking for in a school and why they specifically chose this particular district/school. In better understanding these variables school district leaders can use this information to market their district and use the data to inform policy and practices.

People conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013, p. 47); since little research could be found on the multi-meanings of parental school choice, I incorporated the voices of participants to report on the implications of this study. First, I will report on the implications of one dominant finding, from all three data sources; choice, the ability of parents to actively choose the school their child(ren) attends. Secondly, I will discuss the implication of the themes from the surveys and narratives followed by the meaning units illuminated in the interviews. The voices of the participants revealed the beliefs and values that guided one’s decision making. Results (themes and meaning units) have the potential to cause a ripple effect on policy or practice guidelines; meaning one theme or meaning unit could trigger reflection on the part of the district, which could cause the district to pause and take note or perhaps impact policy and practices. Honoring participant voices would afford the district an understanding and
discussion of how meaning was developed and what resources were utilized to decide if a district’s offerings and statistical data reinforced their same values/beliefs.

The purported meaning of parent choice, the ability to actualize school choice options, revealed what parents are looking for in a school district, as well as resources used to help make choice decisions. This validated the underpinning notion that statistical data have a deeper meaning; they reflected the success of our students, which denoted to some degree, the successfulness of our teachers and staff members in their ability to teach students, as well as a rigorous curriculum. Data reinforced the notion of supporting, while challenging each child to stretch their learning and become the internal motivator of one’s success. It meant to districts that parents understood and valued low teacher/student classroom ratios and they were looking for technologically, respectful environments. Parents also reported that they were looking for educational opportunities for their children in a smaller town atmosphere; managing district growth while still keeping that small town feel, such as knowing every child by name and developing relationships, was important information districts need to take note of. Findings imply a need to ensure current data is available on the district and school websites, that district leaders work in partnership with real estate agents to ensure the district data parents are looking for is provided to them, and that schools continue to provide a quality educational program where students are being successful on assessments, student-teacher ratios stay low, extracurricular opportunities are available, and drop-out rates remain low, all in a respectful, caring environment.
Implications

One dominant finding, across all data sources, was “choice.” Choice provided parents the ability to select; to act as an empowered knowledgeable decision maker that took action and enrolled their children in a district that provided elements of what they were looking for. Patton (2002) states, “It is common in qualitative analysis for mounds of field notes and months of work to reduce to a small number of core themes. The quality of the insights generated is what matters, not the number of such insights” (p. 7). It was the power of being in control and choosing the school district their child(ren) attended that held the most meaning for parents. Jardine (2005), “…the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power (p.25).

The desire to make an intentional choice of where parents enrolled their children for educational instruction allowed parents to give a substantive gift that would impact their child(ren)’s lifetime ability to be prepared for competitive future employment. According to Levin (2002):

Both families and society have rights that are addressed through education. In a free and democratic society, parents have the right to rear their children in the manner that they see fit, philosophically, religiously, politically, and in lifestyle. Since education is a central component of child rearing, this right is consistent with freedom of educational choice. That is, it suggests that parents should be able to choose the type of school that best matches their childrearing references. (p. 160-161)

Parents in this study not only wanted a quality education for their children, but a district/school where their child(ren) would excel, have options, and develop supportive relationships. This sentiment was clear in what participants shared. Maria said, “school choice is moving into a school district that meets one’s expectations for their child’s educational needs.” Liz talked about appreciation for choices for her children; “I like that
there are many academic choice for my children. My children are also athletic and [named school district] has many opportunities for them.” Mary commented on educational quality and relationships, “I want my children to get the very best education possible that will allow them to be successful and competitive in their futures. I also want my children to form great friendships with other well-rounded, respectful children from the same district, gaining the same values I believe in.” Beyond actively choosing the school their child(ren) attended and purposely relocating, as all did in this study, parents searched for schools that offered what they deemed as having “educational quality” and then were divergent on other interests, based on values, beliefs, information receive, and life experiences. One implication of choice is the demand from parents that school districts provide a quality education for their child(ren). Quality is defined in the eye of the beholder, but often a quality education is viewed from the lenses of high test scores, low teacher-student ratios, high graduation rates, and other quantifiable data. The reaffirmed notion of educational quality is not something new. Jacobs (2011) reported:

Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, and Matland (2000) found that parents form the 3 dominant races in Texas (White, Black, Latino) all chose schools using academic factors like received educational quality and average class size. Armor and Peiser (1998) found similar responses in Massachusetts; parents, regardless of race or economic status, overwhelmingly relied on high academic standards, curriculum, and school facilities, when determining where their children went to school. (p. 462)

The act of choosing, or choice, enabled this group of parents to put into action their values and beliefs. An implication of this for districts/schools is that districts need to understand the strengths and struggles of their students, as noted by state achievement test results and to help students continually improve their achievement scores. This also means teacher professional development and support for new instructional strategies and use of
technological methods of teaching must be supported. As more and more learning is offered in an online format, educators will need to expand their repertoire of instructional methodologies.

Common themes found in both the surveys and narratives were 1) choice and 2) resources. Choice provided a happiness and fulfillment for parents in being the decision maker; choosing the school which was best for their child(ren) to attend and most closely aligned with the personal values and beliefs that they hold steadfast to. According to Goldring and Shapira (1993) said, “Parents will be satisfied with their school of choice because they have exercised their right to choose” (p. 397). The voices of parents in this research spoke of self-interest for their child(ren) now and how it would assist them in being ready for their future careers, they were users of choice, and this choice meant everything to them. As Wilkins (2010) wrote, “School choice generates an ethical framework which encourages personal values and legitimates parents in the pursuit of competition familiar advantage through education.” The ability to choose the school parents wanted their child to attend was a privilege they could afford; it is not something all parents have the resources to do. Thus a limitation of choice is the leaving behind of students who also wanted a better school education. School districts may want to think more broadly about serving their public through inter and intra district transfers.

Participants in this study revealed that they utilized a variety of resources; district and school websites, state department of education website, staff members working inside the schools, as well as family, friends, and the community. When looking at the websites parents shared that they were looking at ACT test scores, class sizes, extra-curricular opportunities, state test scores and how the district scores compared to state data. When viewing specific
school websites they were trying to get a sense of character education programs, culture of the school, and what the school felt was important, as deemed by the photos posted and what was written. None of the parents interviewed visited the district or school prior to enrolling their students. Parents mostly commented on requesting school district feedback from family, friends, and educational colleagues, concerning how they liked the district, but parents also viewed district and school websites, as well as the state department website. What this meant for the district is a continued emphasis on students being academically successful, as demonstrated by scoring high on state assessments and ACT exams. It also meant that parents wanted a low student to teacher ratio in the classroom, so to keep this in mind as the district student population grows and making financial priorities with the budget. Communicating often and accurately is paramount; an implication of this is an informed public.

There were four meaning units, or themes, which came from the interviews; choice, choice actualization, resources, and aligning beliefs and values. Choice was the parents wanted to make the decisions of where their child attended school. They did not want others to make this decision for them. The essence of the meaning of choice is that these parents wanted to make a school district selection for their students, this in itself, held the most meaning for all these parents. The next theme, choice actualization, is the act of making the choice come true. These parents did not just have a passion for the type of district they wanted their children to attend, but they have a thirst for making this a reality. According to Goldring & Shapira (1993):

Parental involvement and empowerment are two possible ways in which parents express their sense of ownership and commitment to their school of choice. Empowerment refers to the parents’ role in exercising control within a school,
typically through decision making, while involvement refers to participation or input into a school without control. (p. 398)

While parents actively were involved in choice, at no time did any parent talk about the sacrifices they made to relocate and enroll their children in this specific Midwestern school district. It was interesting to note that one parent specifically discussed with her children the necessity to work hard in school as a life lesson. Maria told her children:

That in order of things you have to work for them. If you want a good education, just because you go to a quality district doesn’t mean that it is going to happen, you still have to work at it, you still have responsibilities and those types of things.

So not only was this an act of wanting to provide the best education for their children, but some of the parents were very upfront with their children saying they have to do their part to have a good education. Since these parents are choosing a public school district there were no tuition expenses, but there are still costs associated with educating children. At no time in any of my conversations did the parents bemoan any type of expenses associated with actualizing the education of their youth by moving to a district of choice nor did they foretell of any financial burdens placed upon them by their new school district with respect to classroom supply items needed. Thus, these participants seemed to be a skilled and privileged group. As reported by Denessen, Driessena, and Sleegers (2005):

Privileged/skilled choosers strongly prefer a school which suits the particular interests and personality of their child. Depending on their specific attitudes towards education, privileged/skilled choosers may also select a school for its high quality of education, high standards of academic achievement or strong emphasis on social education. Semi-skilled choosers tend to select ‘good’ schools, with their choice based strongly on the school’s reputation. Disconnected choosers typically choose a school with a close physical proximity to their home and schools which are a part of the social community. (p. 351-352)
Another report by Lareau (1989) also spoke to how parents of different socioeconomic classes support the education of their youth. Lareau (1989) shared:

Middle class parents do not set out to display class privilege. They set out to help their own children, aware that their future success depends on how well they do in school. They also want to keep their children from suffering the pain of failure. These desires are harnessed to a larger system in which advantage is systematically generated by some and systematically kept out of the reach of others. (p. viii)

Their is the luxury of being able to afford choice options to their children, not all parents are as advantaged. It is here that the work of Peggy McIntosh (1988) and White privilege comes to mind; “White privilege is like an invisible weightlessness knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (p. 95). I am compelled to make the invisibility of White power known. Financial and network privileges allowed participants to use linkages of individuals to make choice decisions and also to have the financial means to relocate to their district of choice and actualize their choice decision.

The next theme of resources provided a glimpse into what resources parents were using to make meaning of school choice. As stated previously, parents said they sought out individuals that they trusted for advice; those being family, friends, and educational colleagues. Parents also used the district and school websites, as well as the state department of education website to learn statistical information about the districts they were interested in and then together, made decisions on all collected data. Parents wanted to ensure the district was accredited, view opportunities (academic assistance and extracurricular) for their children, ACT composite scores, and teacher-student classroom ratios were most commonly mentioned. An implication for some districts is to ensure they are accredited, without accreditation schools will lose students to neighboring districts and will in turn lost funds to
operate the district. Whether you like data driven results or not, parents are looking for schools whose children academically score high. This has huge implications for districts as we offer more varied methods to challenge each child to perform at his/her best; online learning platforms, small groups, internships, externships, flip classrooms, and interactive technology based open-ended projects that require critical thinking to solve real world problems.

The last meaning unit that was produced from the interviews was the acknowledgement of school choice meanings from values and beliefs. The participant voices talked about matching schools of choice with personal and/or family beliefs. Some of the beliefs they shared were valuing a quality education, technology rich environments, schools with a character education program, and a family atmosphere to name a few. One methodology in which parents came to understand if their school of choice practiced elements of their beliefs was through what family, colleagues, and friends had to say. Holmes (2002) also saw this in her research and reported:

Most parents stated that they based their judgments about the school quality primarily on information from individuals in their social networks. These social networks, however, did not provide information about a school’s curricula or instructional quality, as they have been said to do in a great deal of school choice research. I found that they instead passed around the opinions of other parents about the quality of particular schools, that is, whether the school was considered generally good or bad by a number of high-status parents. As I will illustrate, the reputations of “good” schools were not simply passed through the social networks of high-status parents, but were actually constructed through such networks. (p. 180)

The meaning behind school choice is personal, unique to a person or set of people, and influenced by social networks. We cannot undervalue the significance of keeping our community and families abreast of what is occurring in our schools, as well as across the
district. Because this group of skilled participants was savvy with technology to research
district statistics to determine if they matched what they valued in their school of choice, we
also cannot put enough emphasis of the marketing tool the district and school websites are
for prospective parents.

In summation, the meaning school choice consistently held for parents was the ability
to make decisions, to have the power and influence to choose where their children attended
school. The resources utilized to make meaning of the school choice decisions were many,
including; social networks, district, school, and the state department of education websites.
Statistical data concerning student achievement, academic resources, teacher to student
ratios, and culture of schools was sought. The participants in this research were all White
privileged individuals who made choice decisions based on beliefs and values that they felt
would best afford their child(ren) a quality education. I believe that this research has the
power to help district leadership understand what meaning school choice held for parents and
what attributes they are looking for in their school district of choice. Implications of
community partnerships, marketing, technology, culture, curriculum, and relationships are all
woven throughout the stories of these participants; that has the potential to impact practices
in our schools. Since there is little research on this phenomenon, for future studies I would
recommend a replication of this study that embraced a more culturally diverse group of
parents of public school choice.

Recommendations for Schools and Districts

In this research parents shared that the act of choosing, or school choice, in and of
itself was meaningful. The goal of each parent in a free market is to select the school closest
to their ideal point (Jacobs, 2011, p. 464). Understanding the essence of the multi-meanings school choice held for parents implied that educational leaders can learn from what parent’s value and attributes they are looking for in schools; to this end, a recommendation to school districts would be to gather their own data. A survey could be developed that was both quantitative and qualitative to gather both a numerical quantifiable understanding of how important certain attributes are to the school community, as well as an open-ended survey that captured the meanings associated with these attributes from their public.

School choice parents either build new homes in their school communities, or purchase an existing home in the district’s attendance area; either way school districts are seeing growth. To this end a second recommendation would be for superintendents to partner with local real estate agencies to share information about the district that would appeal to potential homeowners. Considering the potential wide spread use of this information by prospective parents, it would be critical of the district to keep the information current and the real estate relationships positive. As stated by Butler, Carr, Toma and Zimmer (2009), “the factors influencing choice also have implications for tax base of school districts and policies relating to composition and peer groups within neighborhoods” (p. 2). Choice parents relocate and add to the tax base of school districts, providing financial funds to provide a quality education for the students. Bottom line, larger tax bases have more money to provide for student and district needs.

A third recommendation is for every district to ensure it is accredited and to consider thinking more broadly about serving all youth by accepting intra-district, in addition to inter-district transfer options. “Signature programs” that embrace a Montessori approach or a high school that offers an International Baccalaureate (IB) program provides inter-district options.
Economics for district are dependent on per-pupil funding; signature programs also attract students to the district instead of parents choosing charter schools, private, parochial schools, or home schooling. In allowing transfers, students in failing schools can escape an inadequate education and capitalize on a more promising education. If we look to the Turner v. School District of Clayton, we saw the transfer policy fail. According to Bremer (2012):

As presented to the Supreme Court of Missouri, Turner focused upon the interpretation of Missouri Revised Statues section 167.131.208 Section 167.131 requires unaccredited school districts in Missouri to pay the tuition and transportation costs of students living in those districts who attend an accredited school in another district of the same or an adjoin county. (p. 499)

This caused districts, in the larger Kansas City region to bind together due to financial matters concerning both the cost of educating and busing students into their districts.

Gardner and Rory (2013) wrote:

On Thursday, August 16, 2012, the Jackson County Missouri Circuit Court ruled that three of the five suburban districts surrounding the Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO) public school district did not have to participate in a state mandated inter-district transfer program, as dozens of anxious parents sought to move their children out of schools lacking state accreditation. The court held that the tuition paid by Kansas City to the three districts “would fall short of the cost of educating these students” and therefore was unconstitutional under the Hancock Amendment to the Missouri constitution. At issue was application of a Missouri law allowing students from a school district lacking accreditation to transfer to an accredited one in the same or adjoining counties, with tuition paid by the originating district. The judge ruled that the two remaining districts could accept transfers because the tuition paid by Kansas City would cover their costs but noted that this would probably be appealed. The ruling was consistent with a May 2012 St. Louis Circuit Court ruling in Turner vs. Clayton, holding that the Clayton School District did not have to accept transfers from the unaccredited St. Louis Public Schools for the same reason. The St. Louis case had already been sent to the Missouri Supreme Court in 2010 and the State is appealing in both cases. As a St. Louis Post Dispatch writer succinctly stated, Missouri “students from unaccredited school districts [do] not have the right to transfer to better school districts.” Pending a ruling on the appeal, transfers to neighboring suburban districts have been restrained in both cities.” (p.125)
The issue of failing schools is not new, nor is the need for parents, without the resources or means to move, to have choices for their children who are enrolled in failing schools; failing in the sense of unaccredited. Gardner & Rory (2013) support this notion:

The recent problems of Missouri’s two large inner-city school districts point to one of the nation’s most intractable educational dilemmas. Failing city school systems are often located in close proximity to much better public schools in nearby suburbs, a situation that has existed for more than 50 years. (p. 126)

Accredited American public schools are central to democracy. Though we have learned that the meaning of choice is the very act of choosing, these parents are privileged, and not all parents have the means to provide this for their child(ren); inequity exists for those who do not have the means to choose. Inter and intra student transfer policies would provide valuable opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged youth.

**Future Studies**

This study explored the multi-meanings of parental school choice of parents who chose a public school district in the Midwest. Recommendations for future studies would allow an opportunity to expand and replicate the study with a more heterogeneous group of parents who participate in school choice.

Expand the study to include parents of color, more diverse social economic status levels, parents of students on the free/reduced lunch program, and parents whose children participate in more diversified student support services. For example, by including parents of color, or those who students participate to a greater extent in student support services, the study may either confirm or reveal new insight into the essence of the meaning of school choice. Expanding the study will also capture participant values, beliefs, and attributes they are looking for in choice districts. The essence of the multi-meanings of parent school choice
is not well researched, thus there is a real need for continued study on this topic; enriching data that district leadership can use to inform policies and practices.

Since parents who participate in school choice can be found world-wide, a second suggestion to further this study would be to replicate it in different regions of the United States and then to cross reference meanings of school choice, to see if there are regional differences. Because public schools exist in different locations (urban, suburban, rural) it would be intriguing to replicate this school choice study in other urban, suburban and rural public school district settings, to again validate or discover new meanings of school choice.

What meaning does attending one of the schools in these locations mean to parents? What attributes of the chosen districts attracted parents to select them as districts where they wanted their child(ren) educated?

It would be fascinating to add a component to this research to interview children whose parents have participated in school choice to understand what, if any, choice meant to them. Did the parents of these children talk to them about why they chose the district they did for them and did it provide the attributes and experiences they had hoped for? How satisfied were the students with the education they received? This would be a new angle to understanding the phenomenon of school choice.

Lastly, with the increased common use of email and text messaging for communication, future researchers need to address text messaging and emails used for data collection and member checking, within SSIRB protocols.

Conclusion
In conclusion, the multi-meanings of parental school choice study sought to understand the deeper meaning of parent choice through the parent’s voices. It was discovered that “choice” meant the ability to choose, to be the individual in the driver seat choosing the district they wanted their child(ren) to attend based on values, beliefs, and other resources such as websites, family, friends, and colleagues. District leadership should understand there are several outcomes and recommendations from this study that, when implemented, may alter district practices and partnerships within their own district, as well as among neighboring districts. Parents of school choice are privileged and understanding the essence of what school choice means has implications for school districts, however we must not lose sight of students still trapped in failing, unaccredited schools. How can we provide choice options for them? Both inter-district and intra-district student transfer opportunities were recommended. Democracy, education being fundamental, is the core of who we are as Americans; we must continue to struggle for equity for all.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Multi-Meanings of Parental Choice

You are invited to participate in a research study.

This study will be conducted by Lori Mann, an educational doctoral degree seeking student, and Dr. Jennifer Friend, an Associate Professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

This study is looking for eligible parents who have a child, or children, currently attending your child’s middle school, and who specifically moved into this attendance area so their child(ren) could attend this district.

Parents who meet the qualifications stated and would like to voluntarily participate in this study should complete the section below, as well as the open-ended survey, and return it to the school office by ____ (date)______.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the meanings and essence of parental choice from parents. School choice is being defined as the untold, multi-faceted understanding of values, beliefs, and the underlying personal preference regarding schools to discover meaning.

If you meet the criteria for this study and consent to participate the following will be asked of you. First, you will sign a form for the Social Sciences Institutional Research Board (SSIRB) that indicates you are voluntarily participating in this research. Next, you will sign a second participant consent form, participate in two interviews, and write a personal narrative concerning what parental choice means to you. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and your identity will be kept confidential in the study. You may choose not to participate or participate if you meet the criteria stated above. If you participate you may choose to withdraw at any time.

There are no anticipated risks due to participation in this study. Although there are no direct benefits to you, it is hoped that the research will contribute to practice, social change, and policy.

Every effort will be made to keep confidential all of the information you provide, it cannot be completely guaranteed. Individuals from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (committee that reviews and approves research studies) may review records related to this study. You will not be identified in this study, other than your consent form by your name, you will be given a pseudonym. Also, documents will be kept in a locked file in the researcher’s office and will be destroyed seven years after completion of the study.

If you have any questions concerning this study please call the researcher, Lori Mann, at 816-718-0256 or you can reach her at lmmeeb@mail.umkc.edu or the doctoral advisor, Dr. Jennifer Friend, at 816-235-2550 or via email at friendji@umkc.edu. Please use the subject line “Research Study.”
Although it is not the University’s policy to compensate or provide medical treatment for persons who participate in studies, if you think you have been injured as a result of participating in this study please call the IRB Administrator of UMKC’s Social Science Institutional Review board at 816-235-1764.

By signing your name below you are indicating that: 1) you have read this form, 2) you agree to participate in this study, 3) you have received a copy of this consent form, and 4) you agree to have the information you share in this study be used for the stated research purposes.

If you choose to participate, please complete and sign this consent form and open-ended survey. Return to the school office in an envelope title “Consent form for research study” by ___(Date)__. A copy of this signed consent form will be provided back to you for your records.

Name of Participant (Please print): ______________________________________________

Participant Signature: __________________________ Date: ____________

Name of Witness (Please print): ______________________________________________

Witness Signature: __________________________

Phone Number: ____________________ Email Address: ________________________
PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Participant Gender: ______  Participant Race: ______

Highest Level of Education Attained: (check one)

High School ___  College Graduate ___  Master’s Degree ___  Doctorate ___  Other ___

Two parent home_______  Single Parent home________

What is the first language spoken in the home? _________

Is there a second language spoken?  Yes  No  If so, what language_____________

Does your child(ren) participate in any of the following programs?  (Circle all that apply)

Special Education  Gifted Education  English Language Learners  Intensive Reading Program

What is your family’s yearly household income:

___  less than $20,000  ___  between $60,000-$70,000
___  between $20,000-$30,000  ___  between $70,000-$80,000
___  between $30,000-$40,000  ___  between $80,000-$90,000
___  between $40,000-$50,000  ___  between $90,000-$100,000
___  between $50,000-$60,000  ___  over $100,000

1. Please share what characteristics, of this particular school, were meaningful and lead to your school/district selection?  (Feel free to write on the back of this paper or use a separate sheet.)

2. What has the opportunity to choose this particular district, and this particular middle school for your child(ren) meant for you?
APPENDIX C
NARRATIVE PROMPT
NARRATIVE PROMPT

Please respond to each question, answering as fully and honestly as possible. In your responses use ample detail so I can completely understand how decisions were made and come to understand your personal meaning of school choice. If possible please type and electronic submit to lmmeeb@mail.umkc.edu with the subject heading “Narrative Prompt.” If handwriting responses, please print neatly so I can easily read your responses. Return the completed survey and consent form to your middle school office by ___(Date)____. Thank you.

How do you define school choice?

Describe some of the feelings that you have about school choice for your child / children.

Elaborate on specific experiences or beliefs that you attribute to helping formulate your meaning of choice.

Choice means different things to different people, describe what choice means to you.

How did you use your meaning(s) of school choice to make decisions about school selection for your child(ren)?
APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED, OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW GUIDE
This interview is being conducted as part of a process to understand the meaning(s) of parental school choice, from those who have experience with the phenomenon. School choice is being defined as the untold, multi-faceted understanding of values, beliefs, and the underlying personal preference regarding schools to discover meaning. Confidentiality of individuals and school will be maintained and a pseudonym will be used instead. You have received a consent form to sign, which indicates your consent to this interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. After the transcription has been made I will email it to you and ask for you to validate that it accurately denotes what you shared in your own words. If corrections are needed, I will ask you to make those. Having you review the transcript will add a layer of validity and credibility that the information is correct. Are there any questions before we begin the interview?

We will begin with some background questions:

**Background information**

Date:

Time:

Name:

Highest level of education achieved:

Place of interview:

Grade child(ren) was/were in when school district was first selected:

Current grade child(ren) is/are in:

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. How do you define school choice?

3. What resources do you use to develop meanings about choice?
   
   Discuss any specific resources that you used to develop meaning about choice.

4. What resources did you ascribe to, to construct your meaning of choice?
If you used any resources to construct your meaning of choice, share with me how that information affected your personal meaning of choice.

5. What principles from your experiences do you use to make meaning of choice?
   How do your beliefs/values impact your meaning of school choice?
   How did you involve other people as resources for school choice?

6. Describe how others impacted your selection of school choice.

7. What should I have asked you that I didn’t think to ask?

**Conclusion:**

Thank you for sharing your perspective on meanings of school choice. As mentioned at the beginning of the interview I will script this interview, provide you with a copy to review, make any changes, and then return a copy of the final script to you.

What is your email address so that I can email a copy of the transcript to you to validate? _________________. (If no email, request a mailing address)

Again, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with me.
APPENDIX E

CONSENT FORM FOR NARRATIVES AND INTERVIEWS
CONSENT FORM FOR NARRATIVES AND INTERVIEWS

Date

Dear ________________,

Thank you for completing the consent form and survey for the *Multi-Meanings of Parental Choice* dissertation research project occurring at ____name of school______. You have been selected to participate! Please type and email, or if no electronic means is available, write a narrative (ex., letter) to me sharing your thoughts on the provided narrative questions (see Appendix C) in an effort to help us better understand how choices are made and how resources effect choice decisions. The intent of these letters is to understand your story; those deeper generally unheard reasons and meanings for school choice that if known, could impact educational policy and practices.

Narratives can be emailed to me at lmmeeb@mail.umkc.edu or placed in an envelope designated as dissertation study, and left with the administrative assistants at ____name of school_____. Please have these submitted by ____date_____.

I will be calling you in the next few weeks to establish agreed upon times for your 2 interviews, which will occur in the conference room of the school. Should you have any questions please email me at the above email address or I can be reached at 816-718-0256.

I look forward to receiving your narratives and appreciate your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Lori Mann
REFERENCES


National Center for Educational Statistics (2010). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities*. Washington, D.C.


Lori M. Mann was born on July 8, 1970, in Beloit, Kansas. As a child, she grew up knowing that the school she attended, 1-12th grade was specifically chosen for her by her parents. It was the religious education that her parents sought for her, coupled with a solid academic foundation. After graduation, Ms. Mann attended Kansas State University and received a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 1993. She continued on with her Masters of Science in Counseling & Support Services in 1995 and then in 1999, she earned a Masters of Science in Educational Administration.

In 1993, Ms. Mann began her career as a fourth grade teacher at Holy Cross in Hutchinson, Kansas. She taught for one year and then returned full time to Kansas State University to seek a Masters in Counseling and Support Services degree. Upon completion of her counseling degree Mrs. Mann worked for two years in the Valley Center School District as a split elementary and middle school counselor. In 1997, Mrs. Mann was married and moved to the Kansas City area; employed for two years with the Fort Osage School District as an elementary counselor. In 1999, Mrs. Mann was employed in the North Kansas City School District. From there she went on to be a Counselor, Assistant Principal and a teacher for the district. In 2003, she joined the St. Peter’s School, Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, to be a PreK-8 Assistant Principal. During this time, she returned to school and received her Educational Specialist degree in Educational Administration from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In 2006, Ms. Mann took a position she continues to hold as a College and Career Consultant for the Greater Kansas City area, employed through the Platte County R-III School District. In this position, she supports the 8 Area Career Centers, nontraditional students, facilitates the Guidance System of Support meetings, and manages
the Displaced Homemaker Fee Waiver for the region. In addition, she serves on the Leadership Team, leads the Academic team, is a SkillsUSA Advisor, and the lead National Technical Honor’s Society Advisor.

Ms. Mann is a life-long learner with a self-motivated drive she strives to pass on to her children. Her interests include not only parental school choice, but also curriculum and assessment, educational policy, professional development, and the elementary years. She is currently working towards her Career Development Facilitation Training (CDF) certificate, all while working and completing her doctoral dissertation at the University of Missouri-Kansas City entitled “Parental Multi-Meanings of School Choice: A Narrative, Phenomenological Case Study.”