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Michelle Heather Lucier
Brigham Young University - Provo

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More than Constraints: How Low Socio-Economic Parents Make Judgments

Concerning Their Children's Schooling

Michelle Heather Lucier

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
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Master of Science

Curtis D. Child, Chair
Mikaela J. Dufur
Kristie J. R. Phillips

Department of Sociology

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

More than Constraints: How Low Socio-Economic Parents Make Judgments
Concerning Their Children's Schooling

Michelle Heather Lucier
Department of Sociology, BYU
Master of Science

As school choice opportunities have become more prevalent and information about schools more readily available, there is still a lack of understanding of how parents use information to evaluate schools. The discussion around school judgment-making predominately focuses on whether parents know about school choice and the constraints parents face which limit choice, but I investigate, using 91 interviews of parents living in a low socio-economic community, how parents make judgments and evaluate schools past the discussion of what schools are available to parents and the constraints those parents face. The results of this study are that parents use heuristics—specifically familiarity, endorsement, and representativeness—to help them make judgments about schools. Knowing that parents use heuristics, policy-makers and educators can better address these parents needs and provide information that is more beneficial to them for making judgments about schools.

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INTRODUCTION

      Using interviews with parents living in a low socio-economic community, this thesis

investigates how parents make judgments about schools. Prior scholarship falls short of

providing a complete picture of judgment-making by focusing on the first two phases of what I

characterize as a three-stage process. That is, scholars have done much to help us understand

how parents make judgments in the contexts of what I call the availability and viability of

schools. I show that in the third phase parents rely significantly on heuristics to evaluate schools.

This contribution draws heavily on scholarship in political science that voters use a number of

heuristics to simplify the evaluating process including familiarity, endorsement, and

representativeness (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Sniderman, Glaser, and Griffin 1991), which I

expand to the education field concerning parents' judgment-making.

      To date, most scholarship has focused on parents' access to non-zoned schools and the

constraints parents face when making decisions. This literature has developed around the

changes in the education system. Education was described as the great equalizer, based on the

belief that schools were able to give all students no matter their background, race, parental

income, class, etc. an equal foundation and opportunity to succeed in the future (Johnson 2006).

Although schools were often presumed to create equality, they themselves are unequal. Schools

range in quality, from those with lack of resources and less qualified teachers, among other

disadvantaged circumstances, to schools with an abundance of resources and highly qualified

teachers with few difficult circumstances (Lareau and Goyette 2014). To address some of these

concerns, researchers and policy-makers have brought up different proposals, such as school

vouchers and charter schools. As these policies were implemented, over the years parents have

gained more opportunities to make decisions about their children's schooling. Even with this

newfound opportunity, parents are still limited by circumstances such as expense (Bosetti 2004), transportation (Wells 1993; Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Bagley, Woods and Glatter 2001), or access to accurate information (Schneider, Teske, and Marshall 2000). Parents' judgment-making process has predominately been studied in this context of parents who know they have an opportunity to make judgments about schools and those who make choices within constraints.

Even in an increasingly choice-based environment, where information is more readily made available to students and their families, we do not actually know much about what families do with that information. My contribution is to show that there is more to the literature on school judgment-making than just the conversation around if parents know about schools available to them and the constraints that limit their judgments. Although knowing about the opportunity to send children to a different, non-zoned school and recognizing the limitations to parents' judgment-making based off of issues such as transportation and expense of schools is important, parents, even after considering these issues, often still have judgments to make and lots of information still available. Not only do they still have judgments to make, but they also must find a way to sort through a potentially unmanageable quantity of information. To do this, I show that parents use judgment-making short cuts, or heuristics, to make these evaluations about their children's schooling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand how low SES parents make judgments, I propose a model of judgment-making in a school choice environment (see Figure 1). This model is built on the assumption that parents care about their children's education and that they are trying to make good choices, but they are making judgments in an environment with an abundance of information—even once constraints are taken into account. Whereas prior scholarship has

focused on the availability and viability portions of the figure, my contributions are to argue that there is more to parents' judgment-making than scholars typically give credit for, which I illustrate in the bottom portion of the figure, and to document what judgment-making at this phase looks like.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

This model illustrates that the judgment-making process for parents living in low SES communities is not capped at finding schools that are viable. There are three phases to the judgment-making funnel, with the first two phases covering what is the familiar discussion within the education literature (Wells 1993; André-Bechely 2007; Bagely, Woods, and Glatter 2001; Ball et al.1995; Andersson, Malmberg, and Östh 2013): the first being that parents need to know they have the opportunity to make evaluations about schools before they can make any judgments, the availability phase, and second, that parents consider their individual constraints when evaluating schools, the viability phase. Even after these two phases, parents are still often left to make judgments about school. This is where reliance on heuristics becomes critical and where prior scholarship falls short. I argue that parents gather information and use heuristics to further make judgments about schools.

School choice opportunities in the United States have greatly increased over the last 30 years making more schools available to parents. Choice was promoted and expanded to improve school quality for all children in response to inequalities found in the education system (Reardon, Robinson-Cimpian, and Weathers 2014; Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield 2003; Goldring et al. 2006; Lareau and Goyette 2014). First addressed in the 1950's, school choice was more heavily pushed in the latter part of the 20th century (Chubb and Moe; Hoxby 2000, 2003). In order to have low income families or families with unique circumstances (such as children with special

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needs) the opportunity to attend private schools or non-zoned schools—schools that they would not be able to attend because of tuition or associated costs—some states implemented voucher programs. Policies such as No Child Left Behind, which focused on improving educational opportunities for minority and low income students, and the increase in charter schools has presented parents of all socio-economic status with more options when sending their children to school. This expansion has facilitated parents in making more judgments and evaluations concerning schools than they were able to in the past.

Although school opportunities have expanded for many parents there are still constraints, such as transportation and school expenses, that parents face when deciding which school to send their children. Concerning transportation, Wells (1993) pointed out that the distance between schools and home was a consideration for parents when selecting a school. Poor and middle class parents (André-Bechely 2007) could not simply choose good schools and easily send their children to them, since parents were often geographically constrained (Bagley et al. 2001). Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1995) found that transportation was a concern for both working and middles class parents, though it was more of a burden for working class parents. Andersson, Malmberg, and Östh (2013) further found that disadvantaged groups, including minority groups and not just the poor, often were faced with overcoming the cost of going to a school farther away and lacked the opportunity to attend better quality schools provided by the government. These working class and poor families face an unfair disadvantage when it comes to selecting schools as their options are limited by factors that middle class parents do not always have to consider.

The expense of non-zoned schools also limits parents' ability to send their children to better schools. Although school choice advocates such as Milton Friedman (1955) and Chubb and Moe (1990) promoted vouchers to level the playing field between low and higher SES

families, many schools and districts did not implement such policies. Moreover, critics pointed out that vouchers could still unfairly support higher SES families who could supplement vouchers to go to more expensive private schools and, in any case, vouchers did not help with transportation issues (Henig 1994). Bosetti (2004), in a study conducted in Alberta, Canada, found parents who selected elementary schools for their children were limited in available school options by their ability to pay tuition for non-zoned schools. These constraints are obvious concern for low SES parents who lack the financial resources possessed by higher SES parents.

My thesis argues that even with the constraints low SES parents face, there is still a profusion of information available to parents and the opportunity to continue to make evaluations about multiple schools. Information is available from a variety of sources including from family and friends (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan 2006, 2007), neighbors (Maddaus 1990), professionals (Bell 2009; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003), higher status peers (Holme 2002), the internet (Jansen 2010), school visits, and school staff (Teske et al. 2006). Low SES parents also rely on school newsletters and other literature distributed by their school districts, as was seen in a study done by Smrekar and Goldring (1999) on the Cincinnati Public School District. Although compared to higher SES families, low-income and minority parents often do not have the same "knowledge and access to school choices" (Teske 2011:79) the amount of information available to them is potentially limitless.

While it is tempting to believe that the more information one has the better when it comes to judgment-making, there are disadvantages to gathering a lot of information. Individuals, or parents, become victim to information overload when they have too much information to process or if there is uncertainty or ambiguity. This leads to different strategies for handling large quantities of information. Some parents may ignore large amounts of information while being

highly selective. Others may superficially analyze received information, or misinterpret information, among other reactions (Eppler and Mengis 2004). Schwartz (2004:75) found that no one has enough time or cognitive ability to make the most accurate decision for all decisions and with large quantities of information choosers can become pickers, someone who only "grab[s] this or that and hope[s] for the best." Therefore parents need a way to handle information to make a decision.

To understand how parents handle information and make judgments about schools even after availability and viability have been addressed, I draw on research on heuristics, which political science researchers and psychologists have studied extensively. Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts, such as "rules of thumb for making certain judgments or inferences," that help individuals go through the decision-making process (Lau and Redlawsk 2006:25). Parents may rely on heuristics to evaluate information when faced with an abundance of information. They are beneficial for parents in that they are "efficient in the double sense of requiring relatively little information to execute, yet yielding dependable answers even to complex problems of choice" (Sniderman et al. 1991:19). Although heuristics have often been viewed as being less rational, in some situations it does provide more accurate decisions than more complex decision-making strategies (Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011). There are a number of heuristics that potentially are used by parents when making decisions about schools, however I draw on specific voter heuristics found in Lau and Redlawk's (2006) study that are most applicable to a school context—specifically, familiarity, endorsement, and representativeness.

First, there is familiarity—a heuristic that is used when evaluations are made between at least two objects where one is unrecognized (and I would add, or not as recognized). Gigerenzer, Todd, and the ABC Research Group (1999:41) state that familiarity, or what they call the

recognition heuristic, is used in such tasks where "if one of two objects is recognized and the other is not, then infer that the recognized object has the higher value." When applied in political science, particularly concerning voter behavior, people vote for candidates who are recognized over ones who are not. Their evaluation of the recognized candidate is "neutral or better" compared to other candidates (Lau and Redlawsk 2006:28). The information that individuals use to evaluate objects, whether it be voters, products, or schools, can be factual or what the "person thinks s/he knows" (Park and Lessig 1981:223). In the context of making judgments about schools, parents use the familiarity heuristic to decide between two or more schools where they know at least some information about one school. This heuristic aids parents in making a faster decision and allows parents to forgo gathering a plethora of information, which can potentially be vague, confusing, and/or unsatisfactory for making a decision.

Second, individuals can use the endorsement heuristic to make evaluations. Individuals can learn information in two ways: the first being from their own personal experience, while the second being knowledge gained from others (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Brown and Reingen 1987). Endorsement uses knowledge gained from others, including word of mouth. Word of mouth, which is not necessarily face-to-face, is highly influential in informing individuals and in promoting behavior (Buttle 1998). The endorsement heuristic in the voter behavior field, according to Lau and Redlawsk (2006), is when voters use the recommendation of others with whom they relate, who can range from acquaintances and friends to organizations and political elites, to inform them on how to vote. Expanding this to the education field, parents use recommendations from family, friends, acquaintances, etc. to help them make evaluations about schools, particularly when parents either do not know much about schools in the area, or have conflicting or vague information.

Finally, there is representativeness—using cues to determine whether a specific item belongs to one category or another. Mondak (1933:169) compared representativeness to the cliché "if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, then it's a duck." Attributes of the representative heuristic are using how similar an item is to a larger population and how well those characteristics typify the larger population (Kahneman and Tversky 1982). Schneider and colleagues (1999) applied this heuristic to their study in education. They showed that parents used visual cues, specifically broken windows or graffiti at a school, to represent the academic performance and safety of a school. Schools that lacked graffiti and were well maintained were viewed by parents as schools that would have higher test scores than schools with graffiti or broken windows. Representativeness, though studied slightly more than the previously discussed heuristics, is also understudied in an education context. There are many possible ways parents can use cues and schemata to make evaluations about schools other than using outside appearances of the school. For example, I show that parents view school demographics, such as having large percentages of minority students, as a cue to parents that those schools are less academically rigorous and would not provide the education their children needed. Representativeness informs parents more about schools than taking what they know about schools at face-value.

With the inclusion of these heuristics into parents' judgment-making process, our understanding of how parents use information about schools can be expanded. Low SES parents face many disadvantages that higher SES parents do not always consider, but that is not the end of their story. Drawing from political science and voter behavior (Lau and Redlawsk 2006), parallels can be drawn between voters, who often have little information when making decisions, and parents making judgments about schools.

CONTEXT OF STUDY

This study was conducted in the Glenbrook School District (a pseudonym), in the Intermountain West, that serves both low and high SES families. The focus of this study is on families living in low SES communities as they have been recognized as an underserved population and have much to lose when educational opportunities are limited. They have also have been less studied, and educational policies have been implemented with an emphasis on low SES families such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and No Child Left Behind. These policies have expanded school choice opportunities for parents living in low SES communities as they can opt to transfer to different schools when their local school is failing.

The Glenbrook School District is unique because of the spectrum of diversity spread across its boundaries. It is a mid-sized urban school district, with schools ranging in racial composition and academic performance. On one end of the district it is characterized by having a large number of minority, low income students, and schools with low academic performance by state testing standards, while the other side of the district has a large percentage of white, higher income students, and higher school test scores leaving the middle of the district in-between. Moreover, Glenbrook School District has a rather small geographical area, around 12 square miles, which provides parents with the realistic opportunity to take their children to a non-zoned school. Although families in this district are zoned to specific schools based off of location, they have the option to transfer to any school in the district (and private schools are still an option).

This district has also done a lot of work to make school selection easier. The application process for school choice is standardized where parents only have to fill out one form to apply to multiple schools. Glenbrook School District has a long standing school choice program and

encourages parents to transfer their students to different schools. Because of this opportunity for school choice, parents are given the opportunity to make evaluations when sending their children to school and are therefore more likely to think about different schools. This provides an ideal setting for studying how parents of low socio-economic status make their way through the judgment-making process.

DATA AND METHOD

A team of researchers interviewed three groups of parents (Polynesian, Hispanic, and white) from ten public schools and one charter school located in the lower income side of the Glenbrook School District. Interviews were conducted from January to November of 2014. Participants, who were parents of elementary aged children that were currently attending or did attend schools in the district in the previous school year, were randomly selected from lists of students provided by the school district. Students in the sample were stratified by race and gender. The focus was also placed on students who had just entered kindergarten in the previous year so as to predominately have parents who had made a decision about their children's schooling in the last year. Researchers contacted parents by phone, making 1,021 calls, with 350 of those calls being answered, and setting up 111 interviews. After initial contact by phone the research team interviewed participants on the day of first contact to up to two weeks later. One or two interviewers would interview the participants, who were often mothers of school-age children (58%), although occasionally fathers, both mother and father, or grandparents were interviewed. To build rapport with participants, the research team made an effort to match the interviewer's race to the participant's.

Interviews were conducted at various locations, but the research team predominately conducted them at the participant(s)' home. All interviews not conducted at the home of the

participant(s) were either at a public library, one of the schools in the district, parks near the participant(s)' home, or a fast food restaurant. The research team conducted a total of 91 interviews, resulting in 32 Hispanic, 30 Polynesian, 29 white interviews. Interviews were mostly conducted in English, but when English was not the participant's first language they were offered to have the interview conducted in their first language. These interviews were conducted in Spanish (which was most typical), Samoan and Tongan. All non-English interviews were translated by members of the research team who were native speakers. All names from the interviews were replaced with pseudonyms in this study.

During interviews, researchers asked parents about their educational background, their experiences with school, and what influenced their decisions about the school their child was attending (or in some instances previously attended). Interviews were semi-structured allowing interviewers to ask for more detail on particular topics that may have arisen during interviews (see Appendix A). My analysis pertains to parents' responses about whom they talked to or where they obtained their information about schools, whom or what they relied on when forming opinions about schools, and what school characteristics they found important or were something parents looked for when making the decision to send their child to school. By asking these questions and follow-up questions, this allowed for a more detailed descriptions of their judgment-making process and an analysis of how parents used information, with heuristics, past the consideration of their constraints (such as transportation). For example, parents were asked "Where did you get your information about [name of school]?", "What information did you rely on most?", and "Who did you rely on most?" in each interview. At the end of the interview researchers used note cards to investigate what characteristics of schools, such as test scores or location of the school, parents looked for when selecting their child's school. This information

was also examined for how parents went through the judgment-making process and what heuristics they used while evaluating schools.

RESULTS

As parents start sending their children to school, they make judgments about schools in a way that I characterize in a funnel-like model (see Figure 1). Although there is some variability in how parents go through the funnel, I present the most common process here. At the beginning of the funnel parents are first filtered according to whether they know if there is more than one school to make judgments about. Parents who do not believe that there are multiple options will not go past availability and will exit the funnel. If parents know that there are multiple schools to consider, then they will move onto the viability part of the funnel—they will make judgments only about those schools which they are able to send their children within the bounds of their personal circumstances. This is where the constraints that parents face (see Wells 1993; Bagley et al. 2001; André-Bechely 2007; Andersson et al. 2013) come into play. This step may require parents to gather some information about schools such as schedules or transportation options.

Virtually all parents the research team interviewed experienced these two phases of the funnel (87%), with few not making it past availability (13%) and a larger number not making it past viability (46%). If parents had not finalized their judgments about schools after considering what was available and viable, they then moved further in the funnel to seek more information that helped them clarify their positions. The central contribution of this thesis is to show how parents make judgments about school once they move past availability and viability.

I show that when evaluating information after having considered what is available and viable, parents use various heuristics that help focus their judgments until they settle on a school. The heuristics parents commonly use in this process are familiarity, representativeness, and

endorsement. Parents' use of heuristics ranged from employing multiple heuristics to just one. If using one heuristic was not enough to narrow multiple school options to one school, then one or more additional heuristics were used to make a decision.

1. Availiability

In order for parents to make judgments about schools, they have to know they have various schooling options available to them. Even if a school district offers choice to parents and a variety of schools to choose from, if parents are unaware they will not use this option. During this part of the funnel parents usually do not search for information, particularly when it comes to intra-district transfers. Rather, they rely on what information they already know about the school district or other schools in their area. Parents were possibly aware that they were choosing a school based off of where they chose to live, but they may still have been unaware that they had more schools available to them other than the one to which they were zoned.

There are different reasons why parents are unaware of the school options available to them in the context of deciding between schools after parents have already chosen where to live. Some parents recently moved into the area, from other states or countries that did not have school choice, and so did not know that this new school district was different from their previous school systems. Another reason parents gave was that they grew up going to their neighborhood school and that was just what you do, or in other words the idea of going to one's local school as a social norm was so embedded that it did not even cross some parents' minds to send their children to a non-local school. Those parents who learned about school choice had learned it from having their children attend school, as Glenbrook School District expends a lot of effort to inform parents of school choice by not only providing information online, but by also distributing information through the mail.

Only around 13 percent of the entire sample were unaware of school choice when first sending their children to school. Daniel Mendez, a father of two and a carpenter for the local school district, is one example. When asked why he sent his son to Oak Elementary he replied, "[We] live in this area. [pause] We didn't know we could send him anywhere else." Later on during the interview when discussing school choice Daniel said, "Yeah, we were just told where to put him. I didn't know you could send him somewhere else. I didn't know that we had that." Many parents who were limited by their lack of knowledge of school choice had a similar experience to Daniel in that sending children to their neighborhood zoned school was just what you did. Most of these parents grew up going to their zoned school so they did not see that their children's experience would be any different.

2. Viability

Second in the funnel, when parents know they have more than one school option, they evaluate whether the schools are viable options for their children. Viability was considered by parents in two ways. First, parents considered schools based on their ability to take them to certain schools, or the physical costs of taking children to a school, which included the constraints mentioned in previous research (Wells 1993; André-Bechely 2007; Bagely et al. 2001; Ball et al. 1995; Andersson et al. 2013). Second, when parents were faced with emotional costs of sending their children to schools, such as anxiety or stress of sending their children to schools farther away, it would limit them to only consider sending their children to one school. Although all schools in the Glenbrook School District as well as other private and charter school options are theoretically available for parents to send their children, parents did not consider the full range of options that were available to them. In their search for viable schools, parents did relatively little research. In my sample, parents looked at schools that were free (or relatively

inexpensive), were easily accessible (generally within walking distance), and had a schedule that accommodated their work schedules among other constraints.

The expense of schools, which is a physical cost to parents, was not often discussed by parents in the sample, but when mentioned parents talked about the cost of going to private schools or to charter schools that had tuition fees. Lavani 'Ahome'e, a Tongan mother of three children who works for a collections agency, when asked why she sent her kids to their local school, said, "It was convenient I guess. And free." The interviewer then asked if she considered sending her children to other schools. "Oh," said Lavani, "I considered putting him in private school, but again money wise... I mean I wouldn't mind traveling to take him, but it was basically tuition." Most parents expressed that they would be willing to take their children to the best schools, but preferred to send their children to local schools because they were close and they did not have to worry about the expense of sending their children to a private school.

Non-zoned schools also presented concerns to parents due to transportation constraints. Sarah Harris, a mother of two children who worked from home, represented a lot of parents in the area who found driving conditions in the winter to be a hindrance to going to schools farther away. She explained her reason for deciding on the local school:

> Basically just because [the school] it's just in our area and you know with the winters here, they're hard to drive and even just sometimes in the winter when it's snowing really hard and we have to drive to school it's really bad. So it makes it easier to just get there cause it's close and even though I'm home I'm always doing things and I'm working.

While the burden of transportation—particularly in poor weather or traffic conditions—was a concern for several parents, the idea of having their children close to home was even more important, even for parents who said they were able to transport their children to a school outside of their immediate neighborhood. Parents wanted to be able to be geographically close to their

children during the day, which precluded them from considering sending their children to schools farther away.

Issues with transportation often paralleled scheduling. When parents worked near or at schools, taking children to that school or the school near the parent's place of work was often more convenient and less time consuming. Children could ride with their parents to school, which was the case for one white father whose wife worked at an elementary school that was not their neighborhood school. "I mean it was just sort of [an ideal] schedule deal," he explained. The mother could take their son to and from school and the son could attend after school programs if the mother was running late. Matching schools to parents' work schedules reduced the stress of having to rearrange schedules to take children to and from school or to arrange for other family members or friends, if available, to take and pick up children from school. Scheduling was particularly important for parents who had busy work schedules and needed programs such as full-day kindergartens.

Rosalie Valdez, a mother of five who emigrated from Mexico, acknowledged that she chose Aspen Charter because she thought it had a full day program. When explaining why she choose Aspen Charter over another school she replied:

> [At] the other school they couldn't choose between full day or half day [kindergarten]. I only considered Aspen Charter since it had full day kindergarten, like how I told you I didn't like half day kindergarten because it didn't work with my schedule and so I [put] her [in] there, and then I found out it [only had] half day kindergarten once she was already enrolled. I had seen full day on the internet or something, but after that I just left her in Aspen Charter. Since the other school's deadline for sign-ups had passed as well. And so she stayed there. If I had known there was no day-care I would have had them on a waitlist at the other school.

Programs such as full day kindergarten or after school programs were important for parents such as Rosalie because they needed a place for their children to stay while they were at work. Parents

did not always have extended family or friends who could help take care of children and so finding schools where children could attend all day or even after school was a priority.

As for the emotional costs, Jennifer Cook made this point. A stay at home mother of four children, she explained why she did not consider sending her son to a non-zoned school or her children to multiple different schools:

> [We] didn't really consider taking him out an' putting him in a different school or anything like I said I… I like that cost benefit. The cost of driving, I wasn't so worried about the gas money but my mental sanity […]. Like the thought of if there was an earthquake, I think, yeah I could've been in you know [in] [a nearby city] during an earthquake with my kids up here, but for the most part I'm usually within two to five miles of my kids if not half a mile or you know third of a mile. But thinking of having my kids spread out all across the city, you know?...

It was thus imperative to be able to get to her children quickly and having them at multiple schools would exacerbate an already stressful situation. She only considered her local school even though she knew there were other schools she could theoretically send her children too. These issues may not be faced by parents living in higher SES communities as they have more resources to move closer to schools (Holme 2002) and which reduces their stress and anxiety over transportation in extreme circumstances such as bad weather or emergencies.

In summary, much like previous researchers have found, parents living in this low SES community are constrained in their decision making by transportation (Bagley et al. 2001; Andersson et al. 2013) and the price of non-zoned schools (Bosetti 2004), but also by concerns such as having a place where their children could stay while they were at work. This was important to families because many parents needed that time for work in order to provide for their families. Taking time off from work to take children to and from school would reduce wages and potentially increase anxiety over financial circumstances. Moreover, having children, especially elementary school children, home alone after school while parents were still at work

was a source of worry for these parents. These worries and anxieties were a constraint to parents as only particular schools could assuage these concerns, making them the only viable option for these parents. Overall, parents did want the best schools for their children and tried to make the best of their situation, but with these constraints there was no need for parents to go further in the funnel when other schools were not feasible for them to go to.

3. Continuing through the Funnel

Most research relevant to how parents make judgments about schools focuses on the first two phases of the funnel presented in Figure 1 (Wells 1993; Ball et al. 1995; Bagley et al. 2001; Bosetti 2004; Schneider et al. 2000), but this is only part of the story. After considering what is viable, some parents still have multiple schools left available to them to make judgments about. In my sample, 41 percent of families were left with multiple schools that were available and viable, or in other words, were able to make it past the first two phases in the funnel. There were roughly equal numbers of parents from each racial group that made it to this final phase. Because little is known about this part of the judgment-making process, this section investigates how parents used further information to evaluate which schools to send their children.

At this part of the funnel, parents collected more information about viable schools and used heuristics to evaluate the information they gathered. Parents may have used all, a few, or just one heuristic while going through this process. Heuristics may be used one after another or practically at the same time. There is no particular order that the heuristics followed, and the process ended when parents felt satisfied enough with the information to make a final evaluation about schools. When using multiple heuristics, parents may have gathered information at various points as they went through the process of making evaluations.

Heuristics

When faced with potentially countless (and sometimes conflicting or confusing) pieces of information, parents use heuristics in order to evaluate information and schools. Heuristics are cognitive shortcuts such as "rules of thumb for making certain judgments or inferences," that help parents go through the judgment-making process (Lau and Redlawsk 2006:25). Heuristics help parents make quicker, less time consuming decisions that meet their expectations for schools especially when faced with contradictory or ambiguous information. There is no set order for parents' use of heuristics, as they can use any combination of heuristics in order to come to a conclusion. For parents living in this low SES community, the most common heuristics used in the second half of the funnel are what social scientists refer to as representativeness and endorsement, followed by familiarity.

Familiarity. To help make evaluations about schools some parents used the familiarity heuristic. This heuristic is used after parents have considered availability and viability of the model, though it may be used with other heuristics (endorsement or representativeness). Familiarity is used when parents are debating between two or more schools, but limit their choice of school by settling on the one that they are familiar with even if they are familiar with the school for reasons that are not related to quality. Parents sent their children to schools they knew more information about over those that they knew less or negative information about[1]. The information used to evaluate schools could come from personal experience or from general knowledge gained over time. Familiarity could be used in conjunction with other heuristics to

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[1] For examples of familiarity in voter behavior, from which this derives, see Lau and Redlawsk (2006).

narrow down viable schools, but it on its own does not necessarily narrow school options down to only one. This heuristic is different from endorsement and representativeness, discussed in later sections, in that parents are using how well they know a school to make judgments between schools, rather than using information to indicate some specific characteristic of a school or using other people's advice.

As an example of employing familiarity using more general knowledge when making evaluations between schools was Amber Jones. A white single mother of three, she was deciding between two schools—Redwood and Hawthorn. Following the model of judgment-making, first Amber looked at schools that were viable to her, which in this case were two schools that were close to where she lived—Redwood and Hawthorn. Then, explaining her decision in favor of Hawthorn Amber said, "I think also the fact that we were a little bit more familiar with Hawthorn. … [W]e didn't have firsthand knowledge of Redwood. That was the only one that we didn't really have firsthand knowledge, everyday kind of stuff from."

Parents only needed a little information to use heuristics, and in this case it was familiarity, to make judgments about schools when their options have already been narrowed by constraints. As with Amber, even knowing just a little bit of information about a school made the judgment process easier when choosing between schools. Although location, or proximity of schools to home, was the constraint that limited Amber to Redwood and Hawthorn, Amber went through multiple iterations of the final phase of the judgment-making funnel—talking with other parents (*endorsement*) and looking at test scores (*representativeness*)—but familiarity with Hawthorn helped narrow down Amber's possible schools to just one and thereby helped her make it to the end of the funnel. Being more familiar with Hawthorn over Redwood, or using familiarity, was the key that helped Amber make a decision between schools.

Personal experience at a school was also a vital part of using familiarity. Paulina Miller, a grandmother who had recently been granted custody of three grandchildren, sent her grandchildren to Cedar Elementary even though Birch Elementary was their zoned school. Her daughter originally sent the grandchildren to Cedar Elementary and Paulina wished to continue sending them there instead of moving them to Birch. When Paulina's daughter had first sent her children to Cedar it was a matter of viability, but for Paulina, sending the grandchildren to Cedar was a matter of familiarity. Paulina was already familiar with the school after sending her own children there, but also got to know the teachers there before she was granted custody of her grandchildren. The teachers at Cedar, Paulina found, were very helpful to her and her grandchildren. Paulina, along with the grandchildren's aunt, Irene, who was involved in the decision to send the grandchildren to Cedar Elementary, had been working with the school, and specifically a social worker, to help the grandchildren succeed:

> I worked with her a lot last year with [the oldest grandson], and she got to know me and she knows where my priorities are and that I just want them to succeed. And she knows about all the transitions that they've been through, that they don't need another one, they need stability.

The aunt further explained their reasoning for keeping them at Cedar:

> […] If we, I guess, didn't get the accommodation from Cedar that we wanted then we probably would have [chosen] to move them, but because Cedar had a counselor that was willing to work with us and understand the boys' story an' kinda communicate with us as a family an', you know, be a team with us then we would have moved them. But because they were willing to do all those things and because we wanted them to be stable then, you know, it kinda just worked best to keep them there.

Because they already knew they would get the help they needed at Cedar and the teachers were willing to work with them and help support the grandchildren there was no need to send the grandchildren to Birch even though it was closer and their local school. Paulina and Irene were

aware that other schools could provide the same accommodations that Cedar was providing them (such as their local school Birch), but because they were comfortable and worked well with the staff at Cedar Elementary so there was no need to risk going to an unfamiliar school that might not provide the same stability and team work they were used to.

Although parents at this stage of the funnel often still decided in most cases to send their children to their neighborhood school, they were still using heuristics and making judgments. This is part of the judgment-making process that is often ignored in the literature, as the focus is often on those who choose (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, and Matland 2000; Bosetti 2004), whether that be by moving to a specific neighborhood (Holme 2002; Lareau and Goyette 2014) or choosing non-zoned schools (Weiher and Tedin 2002; Godwin, Kemerer, and Martinez 1998). Knowing that parents use heuristics, including familiarity, illuminates that the end of the judgment-making process for parents living in low SES communities is not the constraints they face. These parents are aware that they can send their children to other schools, though some using their own reasoning decide not to. They may not be weighing out all available or viable options, but they are going through a judgment-making process that includes those restraints yet also goes beyond them.

Endorsement. To help parents narrow down their school options, parents would use recommendations from others, or the endorsement heuristic. Endorsements came from a variety of sources, particularly other parents with children who were going to schools in the area. Parents would also receive negative endorsements, or recommendations against a school. Endorsements from people parents trust was important as they were an influential force in which school parents would consider more favorably. These trusted sources could also be family and friends but also staff and other professionals whom parents had contact with.

Parents sought for and received endorsements mostly from other parents with children going to schools in the area. These recommendations were often from family, friends, and acquaintances. For Mariana Ruiz, a Hispanic mother of two children, when looking for a school to send her children she looked at the schedule of the school and the advice of her neighbor. "I just have a neighbor in here, in the top [of the apartment complex], and she sent the kids to Birch and Hawthorn an' she didn't like 'em," said Mariana about the other schools in her area, "So she likes Redwood better an' I's like okay then." Since her neighbor liked Redwood and was told that it was "the best school" there was not much need to look for other information about schools. Mariana knew that since she heard that the school was good that there must be something about the school that led to other people, in this case her neighbor, to say that the school was good.

Some parents, and predominately white, when receiving endorsements from others also received negative endorsements about schools, or recommendations *not* to go to specific schools rather than being told which schools they should go to. Andrew and Lauren Woods, two white parents who were born and raised in the same town in which they were now raising their three children, related how they came to choose Hawthorn Elementary for their youngest daughter. Originally the Woods sent their children to schools farther away from home, about 25 miles away, which had better test scores than the schools to which they were zoned. After some financial difficultly, the Woods decided to send their daughter closer to home after finishing up 3rd grade at the other school. They had two schools to decide between, Birch and Hawthorn.

A major influence on their decision was Andrew's sister, a teacher at Birch, who gave them a negative endorsement concerning her school. "When our kids were going into kindergarten, [she] said, 'Your children will be bored to tears here, do not send them here,'"

related Lauren on what Andrew's sister told them. Lauren further expounded, "And she's like it has nothing to do with the teachers. The teachers are good for what those children [children whose first language was not English] going in there need, and for learning the English and getting that literacy, but it wasn't for us. So we looked at places where they would thrive." Because of this negative endorsement, the Woods knew that Birch was not the school for them and so examined their remaining options of schools to make a decision. As with the Woods, using one heuristic did not always narrow down their options to one school. In order to further narrow their options the Woods talked with other parents who had children going to other schools in the area, and looked up information about test scores and demographics (see *Representativeness*). What they saw about Hawthorn Elementary showed them that Hawthorn would "teach to the middle" and would allow their children to thrive, unlike if their children would have attended Birch Elementary.

Aspen Charter was unique when it came to endorsements parents received. As a new school to the district, most parents did not seek out information about the charter school, rather other people in the community—family, friends, church members, school recruiters, etc.—told parents about the school. Fiame Maui'a, a stay at home mother with five children, and her husband Dan, who worked at a warehouse, mentioned how information about the school was passed through their community: "Yeah it was word of mouth, you know. It kinda got out to the community and then like just everybody talking about you know because it opened up and everybody was just so excited to put their kids into it you know." And further explaining who "everybody" was the mother replied, "Everybody, like a lot of the Polynesians here in this community. They were excited and that's what I kind of like." Dan added over his wife, "Like friends and families, everyone that we're around was talking about it. Even at church too."

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People in this community were spreading the word and recruiting each other to join the school. "There was this lady that's a teacher," said Fiame:

> She's Samoan and she also helped us in high school with tutoring and stuff like that, so she's pretty much the one that turned my attention towards the school because she was telling me about more like, you know, oh they have a really good program. […] She pretty much said you should bring them because they have a good education going because it's not like student aids. They're actually teachers that have education and they've been to college and all that. You know? […] I just kind of looked up at her more when I was younger and I just kind of agreed with everything she pretty much said was like, you know, come, she didn't say come but she did say, you should look into it to bring your kids, it's going to be a really good school.

Fiame was willing to follow the advice of her friend because of their long association and how that friend had helped her in the past. Trust had already been built between them and so the friend's endorsement was a driving force for Fiame to look at the school. Other parents, much like Fiame, were more willing to take the endorsements of those they were friends with or trusted.

Using endorsements from trusted others was particularly evident with parents who had children with special needs. Although parents usually received endorsements from family and friends, parents also relied on the advice from teachers and staff at previous elementary schools when sending their children to a new school because of the help that would be provided. Elizabeth Howell, a single stay at home mom with one son, previously had her son at a public charter school located in the middle of Glenbrook School District. As her son was going to school, teachers and other staff noticed that her son was not getting the help he needed and so talked with Elizabeth about sending her son to a different school. Elizabeth relates her story thusly:

> When he was in third grade his teacher, he had a really hard time with, that's when they discovered he had this learning disability, this ADD an' he, they told

us that Walnut Elementary would be a better choice because him going to these different groups was really hard for him distracting. He would see the kids doing something at a table an' maybe he'd wanna do so it'd be very hard for him to have to do what he had to do before getting to this other table you know? An' the way they explained it an' we had a lot of people come in an' talk to me about this an' it was a whole like half of a year we decisioned to make, put him into a regular elementary school.

Principals, teachers, and counselors all helped Elizabeth with her decision to send her son to Walnut Elementary. Elizabeth relied on the information given to her to by people at the public charter school since she was unaware of what resources Walnut Elementary could provide before sending her son to that school. Although she still wanted to keep her son at the public charter school, she trusted the teacher at the public charter school and was willing to follow their advice. This was a similar story to all parents who had children with special needs. Professionals, mostly at the schools but also health professionals, were directly involved in the judgment-making process for these parents—providing information and recommendations for schools when parents were unsure of which schools they should send their children to. These endorsements allowed parents to limit their information search and evaluations of schools as these professionals were able to give them the information they needed to make a decision about their children's schooling.

For endorsements, parents in the Glenbrook School District talked to similar sources found in previous research—family, friends (Teske et al. 2007), neighbors (Maddaus 1990)—but they also talked to professionals, a characteristic more often found with the middle class (Bell 2009; Horvat et al. 2003). The parents living in this low SES community did act in similar ways to the middle class, though they were possibly lacking in the quantity of professional resources they talked to compared to middle class parents. Most often parents would not reject the information they received from others, and when they did it was negative information they heard

about the school they wanted to send their children to. Endorsement was not always the heuristic that ended the judgment-making process for parents, particularly when it comes to parents rejecting negative endorsements. If parents, even after receiving endorsements from others about which schools to attend, still had more than one school available to them, they would continue to use other heuristics, such as familiarity or representativeness, to make a final evaluation.

Representativeness. As mentioned previously, the representativeness heuristic is employed when parents used a specific detail and assigned it to a broader categories based on how well that detail (of schools or individuals) fit or matched those broader categories. Representativeness often required more effort on behalf of parents than endorsement or familiarity as parents often had to gather more information. This sample of parents in the Glenbrook School District used representativeness in three different ways—by making judgments by what they could see, by their interactions with or knowledge of others, and by school characteristics.

Most often parents made judgments on what they could see about the school, such as cleanliness. The cleanliness of a school was used by parents to represent how schools would be run and how their children would be treated. For example, when looking for schools Gabriela Ortiz, a mother of two who moved to the US from Mexico over 13 years ago, related how the appearance of a school affected her judgment-making. Gabriela went first to the school district to get information about schools, including those with dual immersion programs. Bayberry Academy was a public charter school that has a dual immersion program for Spanish and English which Gabriela was interested in enrolling her daughter. "I went to Bayberry," she explained. "It's a charter school so they don't give me information at the school district so I went over there since my mom lived over there and I visited the school. But it was really dirty, I did not like it."

She then visited another elementary school that did not have a dual immersion program, Walnut Elementary, but it left a very different impression: "It's like a person, if you go see a person at work and they are dirty and disorganized, you say no because that's how they will work. But if you see a person who is fixed up and nice, then you like it. That's when I saw the school, I thought it was really nice, it was well kept and clean and I liked it." How the school looked for Gabriela was more important than the dual immersion program she had been looking for. For parents like Gabriela, the school's appearance meant more than if it was clean or not. Clean schools were places where teachers, principals, and staff cared about their students and therefore were better schools to send their children. Besides cleanliness of the school, parents examined the neighborhoods schools were located in (e.g. If a school that is located in a run-down neighborhood still looks nice it must be a school that cares or, more commonly, schools located in bad neighborhoods are not good schools).

Much like Schneider and colleagues' (1999) study of broken windows, parents are using schools' appearances to make evaluations, though parents in this study found that the cleanliness of the school was tied to how the school would be run and how children would be treated, rather than safety. Parents used the idea that good schools are schools that are clean and using visual cues—the school's appearance—to determine whether a school is fit for their children to attend. When used, representativeness is able to use less information (that is less than learning every detail about a school) to facilitate parents' evaluations about schools in a more efficient and easy manner.

As for making judgments using interactions with or knowledge of others, there are two different ways parents made evaluations of schools. First, parents would use information on how children they knew (whether children of family, friends, or neighbors) behaved or did at school

as an indicator of how their own children would be attending the same school. For Brianna Price, a stay at home mother from New Zealand with three children, her nephew's experience at Aspen Charter represented the experience she wanted her son to have. Explaining her decision to send her son to Aspen Charter she said:

> Honestly, my nephew had gone the year before. They had come here. An' he had really loved it. An' he'd been home schooled his whole life because in England I think, well he went to school one year in England an' he was bullied really, really badly so then he went home schooling again. He was just a little bit socially retarded so I was… really surprised that he did so well at Aspen Charter, my nephew. […] He made friends. He… loved going to school. He was really happy to go to school. He felt safe an' secure an' he would just get so excited about the activities they were doing. So that was kind of encouraging.

Knowing that her nephew enjoyed going to Aspen Charter and was doing well at the school was important because her nephew and son were similar: "My nephew an' my son have similar characteristics so I kind of figured if he could enjoy it an' get a lot out of it that my son probably would too." When parents had proof that other parents' children were doing well at a school, were behaving, and getting the help they needed, this was an assurance that the school was good for their children too. Brianna used a specific instance, her nephew's experience at Aspen Charter, to make a broader judgment about the school—that it was good. Although she may have received a recommendation from her sister, which would be endorsement, it was the parallel she drew between her nephew and her son which lead her to consider sending her son to Aspen Charter. This method was a model for how other parents would use representativeness to make evaluations about schools based off of how they saw other children do at a school.

Secondly, when visiting schools parents used positive or negative interactions with staff as an indicator of how their children would be treated at school and if they would enjoy going to that school. Ulani Ali'i, a stay at home mother of six children, found that her interactions with

principals when looking for an elementary/middle school for her older daughter's sixth grade year was a significant factor in making a decision. Deciding between Banyan Middle School and another elementary school, Ulani went to go visit both schools. "So I took [a] tour, I made [an] appointment with both principals," she told the interviewer:

> An' went on both an' I asked them about bullying. What do they feel about bullying? An' Banyan said, "Whenever we hear about it then we'll take care of it." An' as a mother I'm like, she went through bullying in elementary [her daughter was bullied in elementary school] an' I was like, no, I don't like that. I just said, "Okay." An' then I went to the other [elementary school] an' I asked them what do they feel on [bullying]. An' she said, it was a woman, an' she goes, "I don't tolerate bullying in my school." She goes, "Right when you let me know or if I hear it at school it stopped that day." An' I was like, she's going here.

How these principals acted was representative of how she thought her daughter would do at school. To Ulani, the particular attitudes these principals had towards bullying reflected how they would act towards students and what atmosphere the school would have. It was important to have a good principal and administration. As Ulani puts it:

> Because everything trickles down from them. […] I just know that if it starts from the top an' then one day it trickles down either it's positive or negative. So when you meet the principal an' the principal relates, has a meeting 'n tell their staff an' is like happy or whatever that affect is just comes down to the rest of the school. Some can take it good or bad, but especially in elementary an' junior high. High school I kinda understand well you gotta be more discipline, but elementary an' junior high is where I feel that is the most pure learning an' it's where you learn to love it. An' if you go to elementary an' you hate school already 'cause of your principal, that's the affect you're gonna have on your life after. So I expect it in elementary to have for the upper management or staff to teach my children to love it. I mean, I can only do so much, but they live it there with them.

Principals and staff influence how children will view education and children's future educational success so for Ulani having a school with a good principal was key. Parents want their children to enjoy school and the staff at the school will have a direct influence. Although before sending

their children to school interactions between parents and staff are brief, they have a large and lasting impact on parents.

Besides using what parents can see of the school or neighborhood, interactions with staff at the school, and knowledge of others attending the school, parents also used school characteristics to make judgments about schools. This included things such as school test scores or school type, as well as school demographics. Around 30 percent of parents who looked at characteristics of schools used test scores as a method to judge schools. Test scores were used as an indicator by parents to show if their children would be receiving the necessary education were they to attend a particular school. Higher test scores were also correlated to better teachers, as it was for Ulani Ali'i. Ulani's son was soon to go into middle school and she disagreed with her son's preference of school. "My son wants to go to Banyan Middle School. He feels that he'll be better. […] Their reputation academically is not better than Cypress Middle School so, I mean when you have a D in your academics compared to an A. No. [laughs] Not sending you there."

Test scores represented if academics were a priority at the school and that children would be pushed to succeed. Schools with lower test scores also represented other disadvantages the school might face, such as having a lot of students that did not speak English as a first language or a majority of low income students. Having a large portion of the student body that did not speak English as a first language or low income represented to parents that the focus of the school would not be pushing students to excel. This was worrisome to parents as they wanted their children to do better than the average student and to be able to learn at a faster pace rather than, for example, the pace of students who were still trying to learn English. Parents, because of these fears, would avoid schools with lower test scores when possible in order to provide a better guarantee that their children would succeed at school.

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Having a majority of minority students or being a Title I school represented the possibility that a school was not as academically rigorous. Over half of the parents who used the representativeness heuristic looked at the demographics of the school population. Some parents looked at the positives of having a diverse groups of students who could help their own children be more aware of cultural diversity, while others saw the presence of certain groups as negative (for example majority white or majority Hispanic). When it came to Aspen Charter most parents were looking for the cultural diversity because of the school's particular focus, while parents looking at other elementary schools in the district often saw higher levels of minorities, particularly Hispanic students, as a potential issue when it came to getting the best education. Emma Caldwell, a mother of a blended family with nine children, explains what Title I schools represent for her:

> You know and I'm gonna, I'm be very honest with you and I hope that you understand when I'm saying this... having taught school and having taught at a Title I school, a vast majority of my students came from lower income, non-English speaking Hispanic families. A huge portion of them. And there is nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all. However, when you're looking for a good solid foundation particularly in kindergarten either you have to be incredibly blessed with a stellar teacher because they do exist, they do exist. I have seen them. Or you end up having them spending all their time trying to catch up those kids who can't understand what they're saying. And those kids who are already prepped for school end up being left behind because they're not moving forward at all, they're just kind of sitting there while the others [are] trying an' catch up. And I have, I do have a problem with that in the regards that I put my kids through preschool so they're ready for that foundation and having taught kindergarten for six years I know how important that foundation is. If you get into a classroom where your kids hate kindergarten, it sets a huge issue. I mean that's the first year they're in school and if they hate school by kindergarten, there is a huge problem for the next 11 years. Do you know what I mean?

For some parents, then, Title I schools represented that the schools' focus was on catching children up rather than moving them ahead—Title I was a heuristic cue to parents on what they should expect from the school. This school characteristic for Emma was a particular concern and

was a sentiment shared by most parents who brought up schools with majority Hispanic students. Demographics of schools, as viewed by these parents, had the possibility of positively or negatively influencing children's experience and achievement at school, which needed to be considered when making judgments about schools. Depending on the parents and the diversity of the school they were looking for, demographic characteristics could pull parents to or push parents away from choosing specific schools, though often with demographics parents (especially white) were adverse to evaluating majority minority schools as positive.

Previous research has drawn similar conclusions about endorsement and representativeness (e.g., Schneider and Buckley 2002a) but fail to address *why* parents rely on them[2]. In the case of demographics, for example my research finds that parents are concerned particularly with the high percentages of minorities because they fear that the focus on ESL students will cause their children to be behind in their education compared to other schools, or that they are concerned with other children's upbringing (whether minority or not) and how that will affect their own children if they become friends. There is also a lack of research done in education on parents, especially parents living in low SES communities, and their heuristic use during judgment-making. Without this depth, there is a lack of understanding in how schools should address parents' concerns about things such as demographics and how parents can have more opportunity to make judgments on where to send their children for school.

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[2] One exception being Lacierno-Paquet and Brantley (2008) who mention parents not wanting their children to be racially isolated or that majority minority means low quality schools.

Racial Differences

As for heuristic use across racial groups, there were not many differences (see Table 1). Hispanics used familiarity the most, but all parents used this heuristic in similar ways. For example, parents who were already sending children to one school would often send the rest of their children there since they were already satisfied with their current school and knew which teachers and programs were available to help their children receive a good education rather than risk sending their children to an unfamiliar school.

Whites used endorsement the most, though Polynesian and Hispanics were not far behind. White parents received more negative endorsements about schools than Hispanic and Polynesian parents. Endorsements were easily accessible to parents and usually did not require much effort by parents to gather. Having access to a large social group (such as in the Polynesian community) expanded the potential number of parents they could get endorsements from, while some parents lacked such connections, particularly when they were new to the area. Polynesians were rather unique when it came to Aspen Charter. Polynesian parents in general talked to more school personnel for school endorsements. This includes teachers, counselors, and the founders of Aspen Charter. Many parents had connections, whether through family or friends, to individuals who worked at or were involved with the school. Parents were told of the cultural benefits of attending the charter school rather than about teachers or it being a good school (it had yet to open), while most endorsements to parents about other schools were about whether a school was good or had good teachers.

Polynesian and white parents used representativeness more than Hispanics. For Hispanics, representativeness covered three categories/indicators to make judgments about schools: 1) how clean the school was; 2) if the schools were located in better neighborhoods; and

3) if the schools were majority white. Polynesian and white parents were more similar in their use of the heuristic. These parents made judgments by using student demographics (not limited to race, but also behavior), area demographics (e.g. high income neighborhoods), school type (e.g. Title I), school test scores, principals, and knowing other parents with children who go to the school. The main difference between white and Polynesian parents is white parents did not use principals as an indicator of school quality.

DISCUSSION

Through these interviews with parents living in a low SES community, I have shown how parents from a variety of backgrounds and racial/ethnic groups used information about schools. Availability and viability were major road blocks to some parents' ability to make judgments and evaluate schools, but those who were able to continue gathering and evaluating information used a collection of heuristics—familiarity, endorsement, and representativeness—to make judgments about their children's schools. Ignoring parents who do make judgments after considering constraints is to lump all parents who live in low SES communities into one group that only consider constraints, and policy-makers or educators who wish to understand or provide information to this population would not be able to provide beneficial or relevant information to these parents.

The first phase of the funnel for parents is knowing they have a choice about schools (see Figure 1). Very few parents in this study were unaware that they could make a choice about where to send their kids to school. Some parents were unaware of their ability to choose when first sending their children to school, but then learned about it after sending their children to school. More Hispanic parents were unaware of school choice than Polynesian and white parents. This was very much tied to the high number of Hispanic interviewees who were

immigrants, since many of them were first generation immigrants from Mexico and likely not as informed as their Polynesian and white peers who have had more interaction with schools in the US. Additionally, there are fewer language barriers for white and Polynesian parents when it comes to learning about school choice.

The second phase of the funnel in Figure 1 addresses the constraints parents are under when investigating schools. Parents valued having schools close to home where children could walk to school or be driven in a short amount of time. Weather and safety concerns were close to parents hearts and played a major part in evaluating schools. Most constraints related to mitigating stress and fear. These parents were worried about their children getting to school safely, whether by walking or by car and wished to minimize any possible realization of such fears. Because of the strained circumstance of many of the parents, work schedules and full-day kindergarten took preference over schools that were farther away and possibly did not offer the resources/programs they need. Importantly, these concerns prevented a considerable amount of parents from further evaluating other schools—roughly 40 percent of our sample. This is not unexpected, as previous research has pointed out how constraints influence parents' ability to choose (Wells 1993; Ball et al. 1995; Bagley et al. 2001; Andersson et al. 2013). Although the idea of constraints is not new, how parents view these constraints is a different matter. Parents in this study point to issues such as transportation, schedule, and expenses (often time and occasionally the expense of gas) as something that prevents them from choosing other schools, but they also speak of more personal concerns such as safety and avoidance of adverse weather, concerns that other studies have overlooked.

As for the third of parents who made it past the first two phases, heuristic use was key to making final schooling assessments. When judging schools, parents used what they were familiar

with (whether general knowledge or personal experience), what they could see, their interactions with or knowledge of others, and school characteristics. Most evaluations by parents were made using readily available information and that did not require much work to acquire. Parents care about what is more tangible to them than necessarily what schools or policymakers judge as what parents should value. While previous studies have examined what characteristics of schools parents have found important (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, and Roch 1998; Kleitz et al. 2000; Schneider and Buckley 2002a), including academic or educational quality, these characteristics may not be as important as "providing a safe environment and the fundamentals of education," which are valued by lower SES and minority parents and are not as much of a concern for middle class parents (Schneider et al. 2000:107). These characteristics, safety and the fundamentals of education, may not always by connected with what is considered the best schools or more prominent indicators of good schools such as test scores. Parents want their children to have a good experience at school and to succeed which, for them, is based off of how schools are run and who children will interact with at school. Thus taking cues on school appearance, demographics of students at the school, and how principals interact with parents and their views on policy, all of which would be using heuristics, influence how parents will evaluate a school.

This research fits into the previous literature as my study helps to explain what heuristics parents use when making decisions about schools, while previous literature has only mentioned what decision-making strategies that parents possibly use (Teske et al. 2007; Schneider and

Buckley 2002b) [3]. Schneider and colleagues (2000) reported that parents, depending on the individual and "choice situation," either used heuristics or cost benefit decision-making when processing information, though they went no deeper and instead focused on how education and race influenced how people searched for information. Although heuristics can be a double edge sword, as some viewed heuristic use leading to biases (Teske et al. 2007; Tversky et al 1998.; Schwartz 2003), and others viewed it as a way to make dependable decisions in complex situations (Sniderman et al. 1991), it is nonetheless a judgment-making strategy parents used when evaluating schools. Focusing on whether parents have "correct" information (Schneider et al. 2000), how much they know (Van Dunk and Dickerman 2004; Teske et al. 2007), or whether they are making the right decisions (Bast and Walberg 2004), though each has their own merits, overlooks what parents actually do with the information they have.

There are many parallels that can be drawn between voter behavior in the U.S. and how parents make judgments about schools. Much like previous research by Lau and Redlawsk (2006), parents in this low SES community, like voters, used heuristics to make judgments. Parents used both their own knowledge and knowledge gained from others about schools to make judgments (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Brown and Reingen 1987). Parents predominately used the knowledge gained from others as cues for two heuristics—endorsement and representativeness—showing that word of mouth plays a large role in judgment-making (Buttle 1998). The most accurate information may not be available to all parents, but parents still used

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[3] One exception is a study done by Schneider and colleagues (1999) which examines parents using visual cues, or "broken windows," to choose their children's school.

what they knew when using heuristics (Park and Lessig 1981). These heuristics also are used in similar ways compared to studies done in other fields (Gigerenzer et al. 1999; Mondak 1933; Kahneman and Tversky 1982) in that parents are using cues to indicate certain qualities about a school. Applying this research to education and school judgment-making expands the discussion as parents used different aspects about schools, such as cleanliness, high proportions of minorities, who goes to the school, etc., as cues for how good a school will be. The more heuristics are studied in the education field, the more can be understood about parents' judgment-making, especially those living in low SES communities.

As for racial differences, fewer differences were found than expected. Hispanic parents used familiarity the most out of the three groups, though not much more than Polynesians. This may come about since these groups are less exposed to school choice environments and draw on what is familiar as many, particularly Hispanics, were not born or went to elementary schools in the US. Hispanics also used representativeness the least with only a little over a quarter using the heuristic compared to all Polynesians and almost all whites. This may have come about because twice the amount of Hispanics, although only a small number, did not know about school choice and for over half viability was a major restriction on their chance to move through the judgment-making process. Over three-fourths of Hispanic parents were first generation immigrants from Mexico or other Latin American countries and may lack the resources that white and Polynesian parents possessed. Hispanics were also more likely to say that schools in the US were better than where they were from, therefore this would influence how parents made evaluations of schools. These Hispanic parents would not have to worry about school choice, rather concerns about scheduling and programs would take precedence because for them school quality was already improved from what they knew in other countries. Perspective plays a large part in pushing

parents to or limiting parents from gathering more information about schools and making evaluations. Endorsement was used by more than half of all three groups, which shows that low SES, and parents in general, do get a lot of information from other people.

There are two limitations to this study. The first is that because the interviewers asked parents to reflect on prior decisions parents may have presented justifications for their decisions rather than what may have actual happened at the time. Parents may also have provided answers they knew were more socially acceptable. In order to mitigate this concern, parents were asked about their decisions multiple times throughout the interview and to give concrete examples of how they went through their judgment-making process. Although this may still be a concern over what choices parents actually make, it is less of a concern on how parents make judgments because parents were still showing how they used information about schools, or at least how they think of information about schools.

Second, this study was done in a particular school district in the Intermountain West and statistical generalizations cannot necessarily be made about other school districts in the United States. Although statistical generalizations to other populations cannot necessarily be made, it does provide insight into the use of heuristics by low SES parents that very well may be analytically transferable to other settings. This sample of parents was specifically chosen because it was an ideal setting, one that had a longstanding school choice program, was relatively small in area, and had communities of low and high SES parents, for understanding how low SES parents use information and make judgments concerning their children's schooling. Parents in this low SES community act in similar ways to voters in the US and so it is possible to find parallels among other low SES communities in the US or elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to education literature by further expanding the understanding of how parents in low SES communities use information and make judgments about schools. Much of the previous literature focused on if parents knew about school choice options and the constraints that limited their judgment-making. By applying heuristic theory (Sniderman et al. 1991; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011; Gigerenzer et al. 1999; Kahneman and Tversky 1982) and voter behavior research (Lau and Redlawsk 2006) to parental judgment-making about schools I show that these parents' judgment-making does not stop because of constraints.

Overall, parents in this low SES community, although many were restricted by their ability to take their children to non-local schools, did think about schools and used heuristics to make judgments about them. The journey along the funnel model presented above was short for a large number of parents as taking their children to non-zoned schools was not viable. But those who traveled a bit further along the path give insight into how low SES parents used information they gathered about schools. Low SES parents predominately used three heuristics—familiarity, representativeness, and endorsement—to make evaluations about schools. Although some racial groups used particular heuristics more than other groups, each group's use of the heuristic was, all-around, quite similar.

Focusing on how low SES parents make judgments based only on constraints misinforms policymakers and scholars who wish to improve education for children in disadvantaged circumstances. As of the 2005-2006 school year, Rentner and colleagues (2006) reported that only 1.6 percent of those eligible to use choice through the No Child Left Behind Act did so. Therefore informing parents about choice, while important, is not enough, nor is only, say, making transportation more readily available. These efforts, after all, address only part

of the process that parents go through when making judgments. Rather policymakers should also consider how parents use the information they have to make evaluations even after their constraints have been addressed because parents continue to gather information from other people and what they can see about a school.

This kind of information, whether from personal experience or first-hand knowledge from others, is used by parents to evaluate their schooling options and so providing this kind of information or experience to parents is key. Things such as open houses, community walks, or other activities which bring parents and school personnel together would be more beneficial for informing parents, rather than relying on parents getting information off the internet or using pamphlets or other material distributed through the mail. It is also unrealistic to expect parents to use the guidelines of school districts and governments to make evaluations about schools as "hard facts," such as test scores or other information provided by the district, do not necessarily persuade parents to decide in favor of or give up on a school.

To further expand the literature and help better inform educators and policy-makers future studies on heuristic use and school judgment-making, particularly on other possible heuristics parents might use and parents of higher SES would be beneficial because of the lack of research on the subject in education. There is still much to be explored with heuristics and education as the number of heuristics studied[4] is quite extensive and worth expanding further. Bringing other fields of study to education can help bring nuances and detail to parents' judgment-making that would otherwise be missed.

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[4]Shah and Oppenheimer (2008) examine and list many heuristics in their overview of their use.

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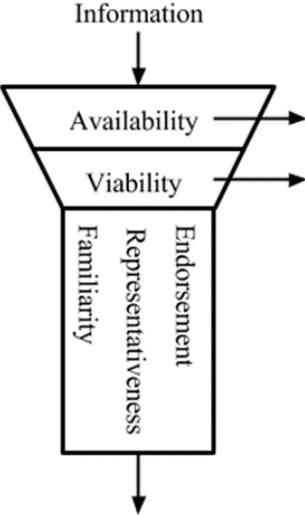
TABLES

Table 1. Heuristic Use by Racial/Ethnic Group

% of Group that Used Heuristic	Familiarity	Endorsement	Representativeness
Hispanics	20%	60%	30%
Polynesian	17%	67%	100%
White	14%	86%	86%

FIGURES

Figure 1. The Judgment-making Funnel

APPENDIX A

Note to interviewer:
- This interview guide is meant to be flexible. You should try to address all of the main questions (in bold) and use follow-up questions as necessary (in bullets). You do not necessarily need to ask the questions in the listed order, and you should feel free to ask additional questions that are relevant to the main issues raised here. This means that you should not expect any two interviews to look exactly the same, and you should feel comfortable following leads that move the interview in a productive direction.
- At the start of the interview, you must remember to promise confidentiality. Tell the interviewee(s) that we will never share their responses with anyone outside of the study team.

1. Get to know and build relationship with interviewee

[Note: Allow the interviewee to locate him/herself in relation to the interviewers. If possible, make connections, build a relationship.]

- Where are you from?
- Tell me about your family
    o How many kids do you have?
- We are interested in multiracial families. Is your family multiracial?
    o If so what races are within your family?
- Follow up question if family is multiracial:
- Given that your family is multiracial, when you enrolled your child in the school and they asked the race of your child what race did you identify your child as?
- Who lives here with you? (Grandparents? Siblings? Etc.)
- Did you grow up around here?
- Where did you go to school?
- How much school did you do?
- And your spouse?
- Are you working now? What do you do?
- And your spouse?
- [Tell a little about yourself]

2. Can you get us started by telling us about your own experience with school?

[Note: Assume that every interviewee has positive and negative experiences, and find out what they are.]
- What was school like for you?
- What did you like most about school?
- What did you like least about school?
- When you were young, what did you think school was for?
- What do you feel like you got out of school?
- Why did you stop/go on?

- How similar were your feelings about [elementary school, middle school, high
- school—whichever they haven't yet addressed]?

4. How was [the adult mentioned in #3] involved in your schooling?

[Note: Help the interviewee talk about the nature of this person's involvement in the interviewees' schooling. You should be referring here to the person identified in the prior question. We especially want to understand whether their support was at the school and/or at home, including what this support looked like (if there was support).]
- Were they involved at your school(s)? How?
- How did they support your learning/education at home?

5. Most parents want to send their children to a good school. What do you think a good school is?

- In general, what would you want your child to get from education?
- [If they have older children] Have any of these things changed from what you hoped for your older children?

6. Do you have children who are in school this year? What grades are they in, and where do they go to school?

[Note: This is only important to ask if it didn't come up earlier]

7. To make things easier, for our next questions think about [kindergartener] and her/his school. Can you talk to me a bit about why you decided to send [child] to [name of school]?

[Note: We're most interested in their experiences related to their kindergartener. Try to focus this and the remaining questions on that child.]
- Why did you choose it?
- What kinds of things did you consider?

8. What did you want [name of child] to get from this school?

9. Where did you get your information about the school?

10. Did you rely on any of these sources (just mentioned in question 9) more than others? Which ones and why?

[Note: The idea here is to encourage the interviewee to talk about whether and why they trust some sources more than others. The focus is on the sources, not necessarily the information they collected from these sources. We'll get to the information in the next question.]

11. Regardless of the source, what information was most important in making your decision? Why?

12. Notecards

We have here 16 note cards with characteristics of schools that many parents think are important. We want you to put them into two piles—one for characteristics that were more important when making a schooling decision for [child], and one for characteristics that were less important when making the decision.
I'm going to hand you these cards, one at a time. I'll say the name of the card out loud so that we know what we're talking about when we go back and listen to the recording.
As I hand you the card, would you just place it in one of the piles and talk about why you are placing it there rather than in the other pile?

[Note: Give the cards one at a time. Read each card as you hand it to the interviewee so that it can be recorded. Encourage the interviewee to talk about the decision to put the card where s/he did. After all of the cards are sorted, continue:]

Now, we'd like you to pick two or three of the cards from the "more important" pile that you see as the most important. Can you talk to us about those?

[Note: Collect these cards in a way that will keep the piles separate so that you can record which cards went in which pile when the interview is completed.]

[Here is a list of the cards:]
- Academic reputation of the school
- Test scores
- Quality of teachers
- Focus or theme of the school
- Classes better matched to student abilities
- Availability of specialized programs (ESL, gifted/talented, arts, music, etc.)
- Discipline at the school
- Emphasis on Polynesian culture
- Child's family members or friends attended
- Background characteristics of other students at the school (racial mix, SES, etc.)
- Close to home or work
- Transportation to or from school
- Safety
- Condition of the school building
- Class size
- Resources at the school (computers, libraries, availability of textbooks and workbooks, school supplies, etc.)

13.   Wrap up

After the interview

Immediately after the interview, perhaps on the ride home, turn on your recorder and respond to the questions below as best you can. (Create a new audio file and be careful not to delete the interview file.)

- Who was present during the interview? Be sure to differentiate between who was answering questions and who was present but not answering the questions.
- What is the interviewee's gender?
- What is the interviewee's career (if any)? Note also if the interviewee is a student, stays home by choice, is unemployed, etc.
- How old was the interviewee(s)? Make an estimate if you are not sure.
- Who lives at the residence where you conducted the interview, and what are their relationships to each other? Is it a two-parent (male and female) household with kids? Does a grandmother or grandfather live in the home? Etc.
- How well do you think the family is doing financially? Look for signifiers—size of house and yard, number and type of car(s), style and quality of furnishings (vinyl vs. tile floors, laminate vs. granite counters, artworks, etc.)
- Dictate any fieldnotes based on your visit. Describe how the interview went, how the interviewee received you, any concerns that arose, and the like.