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# Does Race Matter? School Decision Making Among White, Latino, and Polynesian Families

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Does Race Matter? School Decision Making Among  
White, Latino, and Polynesian Families

Maria Daniela Barriga

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

### Does Race Matter? School Decision Making Among White, Latino, and Polynesian Families

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Master of Science

Low-income parents value excellent schools, yet often enroll their children in low-performing schools. The literature is inconclusive when examining how low-income families go through school choice decisions. It is important to understand the school decision-making process among different racial groups because choosing a good school improves later academic outcomes. Choosing a good elementary school is especially important because this is a critical period in a child's development and can affect performance in subsequent educational institutions. I am interested in understanding how race/ethnicity shapes how low-income parents make decisions about schools. Using interview data from an extensive qualitative study, I examine differences and similarities among white, Latino, and Polynesian parents' values of school quality and how they use those values to make school decisions for their children. By keeping social class constant, I delve into racial differences not previously discussed in the literature. I find racial distinctions among values and priorities in school decision-making. Ignoring these differences will create obstacles for policymakers and school administrators attempting to make a quality education available to children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: school choice, school decision-making, race, education, socioeconomic status

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## Does Race Matter? School Decision Making Among White, Latino, and Polynesian Families

Good schools matter because they are often associated with achievement. However, who actually has the opportunity to attend a high-performing public school is closely associated with residential location. Due to residential segregation by both race and class, underserved communities do not have access to the top schools. School choice policies were implemented to equalize opportunities in education (Holme 2002). Yet, how parents use school choice policies is not always understood. Parents who face social and economic disadvantages value excellent schools, yet often enroll their children in low-performing schools (Roda and Wells 2013).

Thus, in this paper, I am interested in understanding how race shapes the school decision processes of disadvantaged parents. Using data from an extensive qualitative study, I examine differences and similarities among white, Latino, and Polynesian parents' values of school quality and how they use their values to make school decisions for their children. By keeping social class constant, I delve into racial differences not previously discussed in the literature. It is important to understand the school decision-making process among different racial groups because choosing a good school improves children's achievement (Phillips, Hausman, and Larsen 2011) and has potentially positive effects in later academic outcomes. Choosing a good elementary school is especially important because this is a critical period in a child's development and can affect performance in later educational institutions (Entwisle, Alexander and Olson 1997:12).

Therefore, explicating these racial and ethnic differences in parental school decision-making provides the opportunity to highlight important early pathways through which later life patterns of stratification occur. In this research, I find distinct racial patterns among Latino, white, and Polynesian parents in how they value and prioritize school decision-making.

## SCHOLARLY BACKGROUND

### *Do Schools Matter?*

Most parents want to send their children to a good school. Parents often define good schools as those that have high test scores and school ratings because they are easily accessible and are commonly used to define school quality (Chay, McEwan, and Urquilo 2005; Hastings and Weinstein 2007). The extant literature demonstrates that when parents send their children to higher-scoring schools, individual student test scores increase (Hastings and Weinstein 2007; Phillips, Hausman and Larsen 2011). The data seems to support the underlying assumption that children must attend good schools to reach high achievement. Good schools matter enough that parents are willing to pay substantially higher prices for homes in neighborhoods that are zoned to top ranked schools (Black 1999). In reality, attending a good school is a complicated issue that is closely tied to residential location.

### *Who is Sorted into Good Schools?*

Residential zip code often determines the public school to which children are assigned. Unfortunately, this has serious implications, especially when considering prevailing patterns in residential segregation (Logan and Stults 2011). Poverty increases in residential areas lead to social isolation and neighborhood decay (Jargowsky 1994). Neighborhoods lose churches, banks, and recreational institutions and this has a profound impact on neighborhood elementary schools because schools are expected to provide what the community cannot (Wilson 1987).

However, school assignment is not only affected by socioeconomic status, but also by race. As an example, research demonstrates that black, Latino, and Asian families are not always able to afford the same quality neighborhoods and conveniences as white families (Charles 2003). The continuity of racial-residential stratification limits opportunities available to minority

families because minority neighborhoods often have exposure to lower-quality resources (Krysan, Crowder and Bader 2014). Judgments about the quality of a residential area are heavily influenced by perceptions and knowledge of neighborhood demographics (Krysan, Crowder and Bader 2014). These attitudes may also spill over to the neighborhood schools.

Due to disparities in school quality in relation to neighborhood quality, school choice policies are implemented as a way to equalize opportunity (Holme 2002). School choice policies such as intra-district transfers would allow any parent, regardless of neighborhood quality, to enroll their children in a higher achieving school. Policymakers frame school choice policies as pathways to overcoming inequality, but little is understood about how parents go through the school decision-making process.

#### *What Affects School Decision-making?*

While school decision-making represents potential opportunities for upward mobility, we know little about this for specific populations, such as disaggregated ethnic groups and families who encounter social and economic disadvantages. If opportunities exist to send children to a high-performing school, then why do parents not take full advantage of them? Previous literature focuses heavily on class-based explanations for why parents do not choose according to what they value. Advantaged families are more likely to participate in school decision-making because they can have greater control in determining which neighborhood to live in (Holme 2002), allowing them easier access to communities that have high quality schools. Advantaged families also possess higher access to private school education due to more considerable financial resources (Holme 2002).

When making decisions about schools, advantaged parents often develop priorities around traditional definitions of school quality. Advantaged families often take entrepreneurial

approaches to school decision-making, which can be defined as the initiative a parent takes when seeking school options for their child (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz 1995). For instance, if an advantaged parent values high test scores in an elementary school, she or he will proactively seek a way to either move into a neighborhood where the school has high test scores or find a way to send their child to a school that matches their wants and/or needs. But what to make of parents who do not make decisions in this fashion?

By contrast, many parents who encounter social and economic disadvantages value academic qualities (Roda and Wells 2013), but often make decisions to enroll their children in low-quality schools (Stevens, Torre and Johnson 2011). However, little research has explored their reasoning. Disadvantaged families do not have the same opportunities in selecting high-quality neighborhoods as advantaged families because disadvantaged families operate within a different context of barriers compared to advantaged families (Stevens, Torre and Johnson 2011), potentially limiting their school decisions to low-quality schools. What little research does exist focuses on these barriers, such as lack of transportation. Past research shows that when disadvantaged parents enroll their children in a non-zoned school, those schools are often low-performing but highly accessible due to information from social networks, customary enrollment patterns, and location (Bell 2009). This exemplifies transportation barriers; parents with lack of access to transportation make choices based on these barriers, not necessarily school quality.

Although I concede that families who face economic and social disadvantages operate within certain constraints, this explanation does not account for increased school choices made by disadvantaged parents. For instance, the number of charter schools in low-income, urban areas is growing, along with enrollment in urban charter schools (Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme 1999; Howard, Rosenberg, and Van Meter 2004). Demonstrating that regardless of

constraints, disadvantaged parents make active decisions to enter the school marketplace. This is true even though this school alternative often comes at an additional cost to families, as traditional resources such as busing are not offered. Even while families from disadvantaged backgrounds are making school choices, researchers argue that disadvantaged parents are more likely to choose lower-performing schools than wealthier parents (Schneider and Buckley 2002).

While constraint arguments are compelling, recent research argues that constraints only show part of the narrative. To illustrate, when asked why they chose the schools they did, disadvantaged parents are split on their values. While some report valuing traditional school quality such as test scores and academic reputation, many others explicitly reject test scores as measures of school quality or define school quality in unique ways (Rowley, Barriga, Dufur and Child 2017). These parents' responses do not signal constraints but rather different parental values in making school decisions.

Coupled with evidence that low-SES families are voluntarily enrolling their children in low-performing charter schools at additional resource costs, these findings highlight interesting questions about what parents' value regarding school quality and how these values explain school decision-making. As mentioned above, many of the explanations around who chooses better schools is shaped around the topic of socioeconomic status.

Within this scholarly tradition, the power of socioeconomic status in shaping how parents make school decisions can overwhelm other important status characteristics. Lareau (2003) concludes that once social class is taken into account, there are no racial differences in how black and white parents are involved, or make decisions, in their children's education. In investigating the day-to-day lives of middle-class and low-income white and black families, Lareau observes that middle-class families, regardless of race, are more involved in their children's education.

Wealthier families engage in concerted cultivation to their children, or in other words, activities and exposures meant to prepare children for interactions with social institutions. They enroll their children in multiple afterschool activities, and have no difficulties communicating needs, wants, and dislikes with the schools their children attend. By contrast, disadvantaged parents are more hands-off with their children after school and view the school as an authority figure regardless of their race (Lareau 2003). This well-regarded research helps drive the inquiries centering socioeconomic status in the relationship between parents and schools.

Despite the valuable insight provided by Lareau (2003), one limitation is that she solely focuses on black and white families. With an ever-growing minority population in the United States (Colby and Ortman 2015), coupled with residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993; Goyette, Iceland and Weininger 2014) and school zoning, it is increasingly imperative to understand the narrative behind decision-making for a broader population of minority families. Race matters in a variety of contexts and institutions within the United States (Golash-Boza 2016). Racial and ethnic backgrounds influence the job and labor market (Pager, Western and Bonikowski 2009), health outcomes (Mezuk, Rafferty, Kershaw, Hudson, Abdou, Lee, Eaton and Jackson 2010), residential segregation (Ross and Turner 2005; Logan and Stults 2011), the criminal justice system (Gelman, Fagan and Kiss 2007), and academic achievement (Kao and Thompson 2003). Due to the prominent role race has on life outcomes, it seems plausible that race plays a role in school decision-making, beyond how it shapes social class.

### *School Decision-making and Race*

A majority of school choice research compares only white and black families, raising the question of whether the pattern of choosing low-performing schools extends to nonwhite families such as Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Native American and multi-racial families. There are

good reasons to question whether social class is the primary factor that plays into how parents make school decisions. Even within social class groups, racial minorities could still be disadvantaged in the school decision-making process due to factors as simple as language barriers, cultural differences, citizenship status, and discrimination. In contrast to white and black comparisons, relatively little is known about school decision processes of Latinos, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. This should matter to policymakers because school decision processes do not fit one mold and if policies are passively or actively designed for the white middle-class, then minority families will be at a disadvantage. If policymakers are truly pushing for school choice options as a way of engineering new opportunities for minorities, ignoring these differences will make them unsuccessful. Given the way race and socioeconomic status are often entangled in the US, understanding whether minority parents have different decision-making processes about schools might lead to more effective approaches to leading their children to better schools.

#### *School Decision-making among White and Black Families*

School choice literature often focuses on similarities and differences in how white and black families make school decisions (Lareau 2003; Saporito 2003; Bifulco and Ladd 2007; Saporito 2009), to the exclusion of other race comparisons. Some of this research does not find differences in race-based decision-making. For instance, Lareau's work on parental involvement in schools and school decision-making argues that when class is taken into account, no racial differences exist in how parents interact with schools. Similarly, higher educated parents are more likely to participate in school choice among both white and black parents (Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt 2005; Witte 2001). In addition, there is evidence when black and white parents choose, they choose highly segregated schools for their children (Bifulco and Ladd 2007).

However, upon investigating further, it shows motivations for school choice are different for white and black families. Saporito (2009) argues that private school attendance tends to increase for white students when there is a substantial population of children who are non-white in their communities, providing evidence that some families use school choice to avoid racial integration (Schneider, Teske, Marschall and Roch 1998; Renzulli and Evans 2005). In fact, open enrollment in school districts allows advantaged white students to enroll in whiter, wealthier schools, in turn increasing segregation (Mickelson, Bottia, and Southworth 2012). Similarly, Saporito (2006) argues that conceptualization of school quality among white parents is associated with the size of the school's minority population. Interestingly, the rise of charter schools has been linked to higher rates of segregation among schools. Case in point, in Durham, North Carolina, white parents decided to send their children to charter schools that were over 80 percent non-black (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). Durham's population is 38.3 percent black (Census Quick Facts), suggesting that these whites are actively avoiding blacks.

By contrast, black students enrolled in majority black charter schools because their parents wanted them to go school with students who looked similar (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). While both black and white families send their children to schools with students like themselves, they do so for divergent reasons. This challenges the idea that black and white parents make decisions through similar processes, and that social class is what matters in school decision-making. Instead, this suggests that even when only looking at black and white parents, they may be operating under different lenses. However, the way the literature is limited to white and black comparisons inhibits our understanding of these processes. Exploring decision-making among other racial groups, such as Latinos, may shed light on potential differences.

### *Latino School Decision-making.*

Because Latino children have different educational outcomes than their white peers, it raises the question to what extent Latino parental school decisions are affected by race and not only by socioeconomic status. Due to the lack of clarity on Latino decision processes and because the Latino population is forecast to double in the upcoming decades (Smith, Stern, and Shatrova 2008; Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring 2010), it is crucial to understand this group's decision-making processes for school choice policy effectiveness. However, little research has focused on Latino school decision-making, and due to the considerable variation within the Latino group, it is hard to pin down exact processes within Latino school decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

The little research that has focused on Latino school decision-making offers three conclusions. One option is that race plays no part in disadvantaged parents' decisions. Mavrogordato and Stein (2016) argue that Latino parents rely on social networks to make school choice decisions, similar to white and black parents. This reflects Lareau's (2003) findings on the primacy of social class over race within school decision-making processes.

A second option is that Latinos navigate the process like other minority families, but differently from white families. For example, disadvantaged Latino students in Denver use choice options to transfer out of majority white and advantaged districts to attend schools with children of similar backgrounds (Cobb and Glass 2009). This is salient because school districts with wealthier residents often have more resources (Holme 2002), meaning that these Latino families are transferring to lower resource schools. As previously mentioned, black families also select out of majority white schools so their children can attend schools with black students (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). Possible reasons for why minority families are making these decisions are because the higher minority schools could be meeting needs not met by the more integrated

schools, or parents are willing to tradeoff academic quality for diversity (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). Similar patterns between Latino and black families suggest that racial factors are present in school decision-making.

A third option is that Latino decision processes are unique. To illustrate, Latino students face obstacles such as language, negative expectations from teachers, low socioeconomic status, and discrimination (Gibson 2002). Evidence suggests that these obstacles result in measurable outcomes, such as higher high school dropout rates and scoring lower on standardized tests compared to their white and black classmates (Marschall 2006). It is reasonable to expect that there are other consequences to these race-related issues with regard to how Latino parents navigate school decision-making.

#### *Polynesian School Decision-making*

If race affects school decision-making, I should find racially based patterns in parents' decision-making. In theory, researchers should see differences among, for example, Latino, Asian, black, and Native American groups' school decision-making. Race/ethnicity affects disaggregated groups in distinct ways due to differences stemming from language, culture, legal status, and prior experiences with educational institutions. This may be even truer for smaller ethnic groups that have lesser known languages and cultural patterns.

To this end, I extend previous research on how parents weigh school decisions by examining a little-studied ethnic group, Polynesians. Little research exists on Polynesian communities in the U.S., and even less on their school decision-making processes. Historically, the U.S. Census couples Pacific Islanders (including Polynesians) together with Asian groups. However, there is reason to believe that these ethnic groups are distinct from each other and have different educational outcomes. Compared to Asian students, Polynesian students are more likely

not to complete high school (SBCTC 2016). In like manner, Asian-Americans students tend to have higher educational achievement (Lee and Zhou 2015). This may be related to the school decisions from their parents.

Additionally, Pacific Islanders exhibit different health outcomes compared to the Asian population in aspects such as cigarette smoking and cancer mortality rates (Pokhrel, Fagan, Cassel, Trinidad, Kaholokula and Herzog 2016). Socioeconomic status may explain some of these outcomes. Reports show that Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders are more likely to come from lower-income backgrounds (SBCTC 2016). While this could potentially explain some of the differences between Asian and Pacific Islander populations, cultural and language differences could play a role in their outcomes.

A potential explanation for these differences is culture. Research on Polynesian communities finds their culture is unique from others and prevalent in their everyday lives (Gershon 2012). This is illustrated in a study showing that Samoan renters in Hawaii make decisions such as paying rent according to cultural values regarding family and not by the law (Lempert and Monsma 1994). This could be because, culturally, social networks, such as families, are at the core of Polynesian communities (Halpern 2015). A recent study demonstrates that social networks play a defining role in cultural identity among Moari New Zealanders (Herbert, Forster, McCreanor and Stephens 2017).

With the importance of social connections ingrained in their culture, I suggest that social relationships will influence how Polynesian parents weigh their school options compared to other racial groups. Polynesians have a distinct culture that they preserve well, but academic policies may not account for that culture or how it affects school decision-making. When considering

Polynesians, race and ethnicity may take primacy over socioeconomic status in how this race groups weighs school options.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

I investigate whether differences exist in how white, Latino, and Polynesian families weigh their options in the school decision-making process. I investigate this question by fixing social class constant and only investigating families who live in low-socioeconomic neighborhoods and chose low-performing schools. If race does not affect school decision-making, then I would expect very similar processes across all three groups. If race does play an essential role in decision-making processes, I expect to observe differences among all three groups.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

To explore whether race or ethnicity make any difference on how parents make decisions, I focused on a small urban school district in the Intermountain West. I chose this district because it has several characteristics that provided an ideal context for examining school based decision-making among families who face social and economic disadvantages. Features such as a small geographic area (which limits the degree to which transportation is a barrier) and district-wide policies and support for intra-district transfers encouraged school based decision-making (Phillips, Hausman, and Larsen 2011). Furthermore, all schools throughout the district were at about 90 percent capacity, meaning that almost all parents who participated in intra-district choice could attend their first-choice school.

Additionally, this school district offered a wide range of schools and a diverse student population in both race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Residential housing patterns in the district were segregated, with most low-income and minority students living on one side of the

district, while the wealthier white families lived on the other side of the district. Because of zoning boundaries, the demographics of the schools reflect housing segregation. Intra-district transfer participation was relatively high, including among low-socioeconomic and minority students. The district also had little competition from private schools; thus, most school choices generally took place within the public-school sector. Because intra-district transfers occur with many school choice options accompanied by limited barriers to choice, this district was an ideal context for studying the meanings and interpretations that arise when parents discuss their children's education and the decisions they make. Because this school district had a high population of white, Latino, and Polynesian families, it allowed me to delve into differences between ethnic groups not previously discussed in the literature.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Sample*

I used data from a large qualitative study conducted by researchers at Brigham Young University. The research team interviewed 91 families who sent their children to ten public schools and one charter school located in the school district. They limited the interviews to families who had children attending kindergarten at a low-performing school within the district, allowing them to focus on families who had recently gone through the school enrollment process. The school district provided the names and contact information for enrolled students. Researchers generated a random sample of students from this list. The research team contacted families by phone and set up interviews. Researchers conducted interviews in different locations, but the interview usually took place in the participant(s)' home.

I specifically focused this analysis on the 35 families who actively enrolled their child in a non-zoned, low-performing school. The other 56 families enrolled their children in an assigned

neighborhood school and are therefore not included in my analysis. Within my analysis group, there were 11 Caucasian, 11 Latino, and 13 Polynesian families who made active decisions, meaning they used school choice policies to enroll their children in a non-assigned school within the district. This allowed me to consider the questions about potential racial/ethnic differences among ethnic groups because I fixed social class constant and compare the school decision-making processes of the three ethnic groups.

### *Interviews*

Researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the parent(s) of the sampled children. They asked interviewees 10 multi-faceted questions about their own experiences with education, their experiences with their child's school, and what they thought determined whether a school was "good" (see Appendix A). Interviewers also asked the parent(s) a series of questions concerning how they obtained information about the school their child attended, as well as how they evaluated the reliability of the source. The interview process allowed parents to explain the processes that went into their decision, which is useful for my research purposes as I am interested in inquiring why they sent their child to a low-performing school. After we obtained the interviews, we transcribed all interviews. Most interviews were conducted in English and native speakers conducted a handful of Spanish interviews. Native speakers also transcribed and translated the Spanish interviews.

### *Analysis*

Research shows that even though disadvantaged parents say they value high-performing academic schools, they decide to enroll their children in low-performing schools (Stevens, Torre, and Johnson 2011). In my thesis, I expand this research by examining parents who actively enrolled their child in a failing non-zoned school, meaning a school where their child was not

geographically assigned. I investigate whether there are racial/ethnic differences in decision-making.

Analysis proceeded in the following fashion. Members from the research team initially coded all 91 interviews. They coded for broad themes such as family demographics, information sources, and active school decision-making. After this initial round of coding, I analyzed the 35 interviews where families were enrolling their children in a non-assigned school. While I relied heavily on transcripts, I listened to recordings of the interviews and poured over the field notes. I had a simple coding guide, which consisted of codes such as values, explanation for choice, priorities, and useful quotes.

I examined how the families in these three ethnic groups navigated the school decision process as they weighed multiple options. In my first round of coding I coded for descriptions of what parents valued in schools and explanations of why parents enrolled their children in a certain school. In the second round of coding, I focused specifically on the school decision process; during this stage, significant themes emerged about parent's priorities. In my final stage of coding, I ranked the top priorities that emerged and compared those rankings across the three racial groups. To get a broad view of the data, I not only looked at specific codes but also used matrices techniques (Miles and Huberman 1994) and detailed memo notes.

## FINDINGS

### *What Parents Value*

The first step in exploring how parents weighed their options in the school decision process was to understand what parents valued in education. In the interview process, we asked parents to describe the characteristics of a good school. I referred to their responses as “values.” Parents’ values were their definitions of school quality and what they valued about good schools.

Recall that all the schools in this study were low-performing and all three groups of parents were actively enrolling their children in a failing school. Past research demonstrated that parents value different attributes associated with school quality, or have various meanings assigned to traditional terms of academic excellence (Rowley, Barriga, Dufur, Child 2017). I found that across the three race groups, parents value different attributes when describing good schools. The most obvious pattern that arose were in Latino parents' values.

*Latino parents and values.* Latino parents truly valued individual attention for their children. Out of all three parental groups, this was the most persistent pattern concerning what parents valued. Overall, Latino parents conveyed a need for a sense of individual attention or respect from schools or school personal. Alejandra, a stay at home mom from Colombia, described school quality to us, "To me, a good school is where they know who my kids are. They are getting the attention that they need . . . I think a good school is not just about . . . academics." Alejandra's description of school quality characterized the sense of what Latino parents thought constituted school quality. Alejandra is specific and direct with what she looks for in school quality; this was characteristic of many Latino parents we interviewed.

This was true of Mariana, a first-generation immigrant from Mexico. Mariana worked on and off as a cosmetologist. Her husband was a carpenter at a local closet factory, and they had three children, ages two, six, and ten. Mariana described school quality as a place where her children would be heard.

It would be a place where my kids can get the attention that they needed and would have the confidence to go up to their teachers and ask for help if they needed help. Or feel like they can talk freely about anything with their teachers. Just like feel that they wouldn't have any barriers to communicate with anybody there.

Again, the idea of visibility and dignity and wanting that for her children is present in Mariana's description. Mariana wants visibility for her children, as many Latino parents expressed. In this

study, a large portion of Latino parents were immigrants with low levels of education (some had not gotten past the 6<sup>th</sup> grade). Their lack of education led to little status within the community, and perhaps led to desiring respect. Many of these interviews were also conducted in Spanish, revealing that language barriers were salient among this subsample. These two clues may explain part of the reason why Latino parents valued dignity and respect so deeply. Perhaps Latino parents did not feel treated with respect outside of school communities and wanted their children to have what they themselves did not receive.

*Polynesian and white parental values.* By contrast, I found that Polynesian and white families did not focus on dignity and respect but were similar in their descriptions of what they valued in schools. When asked what they thought a good school was, they often gave responses associated with traditional measures of school quality such as test scores or academic reputation. Kalani, a Samoan dad who worked as a baggage handler at the local airport, described good schools as private schools and charter schools because of their academics and areas of specialization.

“Charter schools [. . .] It's a wonderful thing because a lot of them specialize in certain areas like . . . they specialize in science and math and so if you have a kid that's good in numbers, that might [be] a route you might wanna explore.

In reference to his own experience with education, Kalani also mentioned that while growing up, he viewed private schools as the “good” schools, suggesting that he started learning these values young. Charter schools seemed to offer a viable alternative to public schools and seemed equitable to private schools. This was because of charter schools’ potential specializations without the expensive price tags. Glenn, a white grandfather, and guardian of his grandchild, described a good school as a private school. He had a strong opinion on what constituted school quality; when asked about school quality, he raised his voice and quickly responded, “well, I

think that probably there is a distinction between public schools and private schools [. . .] Education, the discipline there [private schools] was even greater than the public schools.” To many Polynesian and white families, any school different from a public schools was superior and therefore defined as a good school.

Beyond associating private and charter schools with better quality, white and Polynesian parents tended to give overwhelmingly vague responses referencing traditional aspects of schools that most schools have regardless of the school’s quality. Parents claimed to value the following regarding school quality: “good student teacher ratios, clean, nice” (Veronica, white Maple Elementary parent); “good walking distance, good teachers, good working skills” (Betty, white Birch Elementary parent); “regular school where they teach all the subjects” (La’akea, Polynesian Aspen Charter parent); “teachers that help out the kids in their classes” (Meilani, Polynesian Aspen Charter parent). Despite repeated probes, these parents could not articulate well what they meant about school quality. These values or definitions of school quality are quite vague which may be telling that perhaps parents might not think deeply about school quality. Their vagueness sharply contrasted with Latino parents, who had strong opinions towards school values.

At the same time, there were Polynesian and white parents who had specific values about school quality that related to traditional definitions of school quality such as academics and test scores but were distinct from valuing private and charter schools. These parents described valuing characteristics such as “high academics” (Fetia, Polynesian Scarlet Oak parent); “rigorous academic program that is challenging and reflective of the real world” (Lea, Polynesian Aspen Charter parent); “academics of the school . . . good results with scores means better education” (Marlin, white Willow Elementary parent); “not just [test] scores, but also the

demographics” (Kelly, white Pine Elementary parent). The aforementioned definitions of school quality are more typical of what the literature defines as school quality and they were shared across white and Polynesian parents. Even though white and Polynesian parents resembled each other with these stated values, different processes could have potentially existed, as seen with white and black families enrolling their children into segregated schools (Bifulco and Ladd 2007). In examining what parents value in schools, considering race, it illuminates differences among parents across the three race groups. I then examined racial differences existent in the actual decision-making process.

### *Priorities*

Priorities were the motivating factors for why parents enrolled their children in a non-zoned school. While priorities may compliment values, they were not the same concept. Values were what parents verbally claimed to care about in good schools or their definitions of school quality. Priorities described *why* parents chose specific schools for their children. Across groups, four patterns emerged: status, emotional needs, special needs, and social connections. While all parents used a constellation of information to make decisions, most parents in my sample emphasized a single priority that in turn became the top motivating factor. One priority that spanned across two groups was status.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

*Status priority—a white and Polynesian story.* The status priority is one parents utilized across both white and Polynesian parents. The status priority is twofold. As discussed in the value section above, a portion of white and Polynesian parents valued private schools. However, they could not afford private schools, and prioritized charter schools because they believed it was similar to the type of education. The first facet equated charter schools with private schools,

hence thinking that charter schools were essentially “free” private schools. This was evident when we interviewed Rosi and her husband, Atea, who emigrated from Tonga.

Atea worked as a baggage handler for Alaska Airlines at a local airport and Rosi was a stay-at-home mother. They lived in a small one-story home with their four children, all of whom attended Aspen Charter Elementary. Rosi immediately described school quality as the nearby private school, Silver Star. “Silver is a good school, but you have to pay for it.” Rosi told us, and Atea followed up, “Yeah, my wife [Rosi] wanted them in Silver Star, I looked at what they were going to offer, it was great.” Due to financial constraints, Rosi and Atea did not enroll their children in Silver Star but did register them in Aspen Charter, a nearby school. Both Rosi and Atea maintained that Aspen Charter was a good school for the mere fact that it was a charter school, regardless of the fact that Aspen Charter had a failing grade from the state. Rosi and Atea used status as their top priority in weighing their options because they wanted their children to go to the best school possible, and to them that was a charter school instead of a neighborhood school.

Similarly, Glenn, a white grandfather, enrolled his grandson in Aspen Charter. Glenn and his wife, Linda, had full custody of their grandson, Brandon. Brandon’s mother struggled with addiction and was currently living in a rehabilitation center. When Glenn and Linda gained custody of Brandon, they weighed different school options for him and essentially used the same status priority to enroll Brandon in Aspen Charter. Glenn described that he felt attracted to Aspen Charter because, “they have some traditions that are not associated with any other school, the public schools.” Glenn exhibited a desire to distance his grandson from the public schools and he felt that the specialization focus in a charter school offered this distance.

The other side of status priorities focused on demographics. One indicator of status to some parents was the demographic makeup of the school. Marlin, who valued "good academics" and "test scores" (see Table 2) was passionate about not sending his child to a school with a high number of minority children. A few years ago, Marlin's daughter, Emily, was enrolled in Banyan Elementary, a school with a high percentage of ESL students. Marlin was not shy in expressing his thoughts on Banyan:

Ghetto. They like to act like gangster and everything was in like Spanish. So you feel like you were living in some other country instead, yeah it's alright to be bilingual, but it was everything in Spanish! So that was a big population there.

Marlin uses "ghetto" and "gangster" to describe the Latino population at the school. He described feeling like he was in a foreign country whenever he visited Banyan. Marlin enrolled Emily in Maple Elementary, a school that better fit his priorities because it had a higher number of white students. He admits later on in his interview that if Maple Elementary had been "Mexican oriented" he would not have enrolled his daughter there. Marlin associated his perception of the student body with school quality, which clearly demonstrates the use of status as his top priority.

[Maple Elementary] had more . . . English . . . there were also a lot of Americans so it was like more of a balance. You could get everything both languages, an' it was just more organized. Like the principal dressed nice, the principal on Banyan dressed like . . . like a prostitute.

Marlin showed the extent of this disdain towards Banyan by commenting on the physical appearance of a professional educator, which he asserts was profoundly negative. Marlin believed that because Maple Elementary's principal dressed well, that it was a better school. Marlin's comments reinforce his ideas of status and how strongly he considered the perceived status of local elementary schools.

Fetia, who was of Tongan background, also had similar comments about Banyan Elementary. Fetia and her family share a home with two other Tongan families. Fetia and her husband are in their late thirties and both work at a nearby payday loan center. Fetia's children are geographically assigned to Banyan, but Fetia strongly dislikes Banyan due to its high enrollment of Latino students.

There's its Spanish influence, and it's what do you call it? Low cost of living. Pretty much kinda ghetto. You know like the poor people live here.

Fetia immediately distances herself from the Latino population, she refers to them as "poor," disregarding that they all live in the same low-socioeconomic neighborhood. Like Marlin, Fetia uses terms such as "ghetto" to describe Banyan's large Latino population. Fetia's daughter currently attends Aspen Charter, but Fetia is still not happy with the current situation. She would love for her daughter to participate in a school where she was the only Polynesian student:

Fetia: Yeah, I would love for her to go to an all palangi [i.e., white] school and she's the only Poly. Just because she would get that . . .

Interviewer: What does that tell you? If it's an all palangi school for you rather than it just be palangi it's telling you something else, what is it?

Fetia: It's telling me she's going to pick up on the white man's world.

Interviewer: And what things do you want her to pick up from the white man's world?

Fetia: Like to . . . I don't know just the way things are now is . . . with Polynesians I mean you see a lot of those on the news 'oh it was a Poly that did this, a Poly that did that. You know? You see the negative stuff of Poly but in reality there's a lot of good things too but not too much people know about. So with her going to a palangi school it'll open their eyes to see hey there is other you know?

Interviewer: What is it that you said that you wanted her to pick it up from them? What is it that you want that an all palangi school, what does that tell you about that school?

Fetia: I don't know it's just . . . I already know the way it goes when there's too much Polys. It goes downhill.

“Palangi” is the Tongan term for a white person. Fetia wants Leilani to attend a majority white school because she wants her daughter to learn success in the “white man’s world.” Not only does Fetia speak negatively toward Latinos, but also toward “Polys,” the minority group to which she belongs. Fetia demonstrates how she used a white majority demographics status priority to take her daughter out of Banyan, and how she hopes one day her daughter will go to a school that has higher status, signified by the presence of “palangis.”

Fetia displayed a mismatch (refer to Table 2) between her value of “high academics” but chose a school based on status. Among white and Polynesian parents, status signaled a school similar to private schools or desirability of a white student population. Table 2 shows how some parents’ stated values and priorities matched, i.e. the parents who valued private school education and chose charter schools.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

*Emotional needs priority—a Latino story.* Latino parental priorities in school decision-making often matched what they valued. Throughout all three race groups, parents often prioritize their school choice decisions around their children’s specific needs. While types of needs differed, emotional needs revolved around stability, dignity, and individual attention. I find that this narrative belonged mostly to Latino parents. Although it was not uncommon for other parents to mention their children’s emotional needs, Latino parents overwhelmingly used it as their top priority as they weighed their school options.

Latino parents cared deeply about stability, dignity, and an overall sense that the school saw their children as individuals. As Latino parents opened up and shared more of their experiences, it became evident that many children in these families experienced stressful situations with bullying and being treated with a lack of respect. Mariana recounted her

daughter's time at Meadowlark Elementary, which was a profoundly negative one. Her daughter, Beatriz, was bullied:

Well, she would tell them that they are always making fun of her, that they would say that they didn't want to play or if she wanted to play with another classmate they would say "Eww don't play with her. Whoever wants to be her friend?" Just rude comments like that.

When Mariana tried to intervene, no teacher would give her meaningful responses. Mariana would tell Beatriz's teachers at Meadowlark specific instances of when her daughter was bullied, but Mariana felt she was not heard:

Some people, some teachers at school they just don't care. They're not caring of the students and so kids will go up to them and tell them 'hey, you know, this and this is going on' and they will be like, 'okay' and never do anything about it. So that shows you that they don't care because they aren't trying to help. Yeah, they're hearing you out, but it's going in through one ear and coming out through the other cause they aren't doing anything about it . . . they said they were gonna try and do something about it, but nothing ever changed.

Mariana told us that Beatriz hated going to school and that this did not align with Mariana's goals of giving Beatriz a good education. Even though Mariana reached out to the school on multiple occasions, she never saw any change. This experience solidified Mariana's need to look for a new school for her child. Aspen Charter, a local charter school that had recently opened, became appealing to Mariana. A site visit to Aspen Charter convinced her that Aspen would be a better environment for Beatriz. Mariana prioritized her daughter's individual emotional needs and decided to enroll Beatriz in Aspen Charter.

In like manner to Mariana, Sofia prioritized her daughter's emotional well-being when weighing her school options. Sofia emigrated from Mexico 12 years ago and had three young children. Both Sofia and her husband worked as bussers in a downtown restaurant, and her husband had a side business as a DJ. While Sofia claimed to value academic reputation, she enrolled her daughter in the neighborhood Cedar Elementary, which was failing. However,

Sofia's six-year-old daughter, Julia, experienced bullying at Cedar Elementary. Julia would come home sobbing on multiple occasions when other children were cruel to her. Sofia tried reaching out to the school, but they dismissed her concerns:

They tell me that nothing was wrong with my daughter, they told me. It's just tantrums. And I said no, she doesn't want to go to school, she doesn't want to put on her glasses because they bullied her, she didn't want to put on certain pants because they bullied her. And I wanted to fight those girls. I said why am I not 6 years old!? [laughs]. I told her to defend herself and no she would start to cry, her grades dropped by a lot.

Bullies made fun of Julia's glasses and clothing, affecting her desire to attend school. When her mom initially attempted to address the issue with Cedar Elementary, they ascribed the whole situation to Julia throwing tantrums. Not only was Julia emotionally distraught, but her grades suffered, which caused Sofia to take external action. Sofia eventually took Julia to a psychologist:

I had to take her to therapy because of the bullying that she had over there. I didn't receive help from a counselor or a therapist [at Cedar], nothing.

Frustrated and worried for her daughter, Sofia wrote a letter to the principal of Willow Elementary explaining the situation. Willow Elementary responded positively, even offering therapy through the school:

And I wrote a letter to the principal, and I explained the situation about my daughter. And so I went to Willow, and I explained about the problem that my daughter had, and then they offered the counselor, they told me that if I needed a psychologist, they could help me.

Sofia reported that Julia was doing much better at Willow Elementary, evidence that Sofia thought she had made the right choice. Although Sofia valued academic reputation, she prioritized her daughter's emotional well-being. Both Cedar and Willow Elementary are low-performing schools, yet that was not relevant to Sofia as she weighed school options. Julia's

individual need of emotional well-being surpassed any other priority. Although Sofia valued academic reputation, her priority of emotional needs outweighed her values.

Another highly prioritized type of emotional need was stability. We interviewed Darla on a chilly September evening on the patio of her first-floor apartment. Darla, who was Latina, was the legal guardian of her grandson, Ignacio. Although Ignacio was only six years old, he had been in an out of several homes throughout his life. While his mother was in rehabilitation for opioid addiction, Darla decided to step in and take full custody of her grandson.

Ignacio was enrolled in Birch Elementary for his kindergarten year. When he went to live with Darla, she lived outside of the boundaries of Birch Elementary. She could have enrolled Ignacio in Scarlet Oak, the failing school but she did not; she was also aware of higher ranked schools in north side of the district but did not enroll Ignacio there either. She told us that although she knew schools on the north side of the district had “wealthy” children attending, she prioritized stability for Ignacio. Like other Latino parents, Darla also mentioned that she prioritized when schools gave individualized attention to students (see Table 3), “a good school would be one that treated children as individuals.” While emotional needs were highly prioritized by Latino parents, white parents prioritized a different kind of need.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

*Special needs—a white story.* Special needs priorities were based on behavioral problems and learning disabilities. Finding schools with specific specialized programs became a top priority for parents who had a child with special needs. White families in my sample were the most likely to use special needs as a priority in their school decisions process, despite evidence suggesting that white children do not have higher levels special needs compared to black and other racial minorities (van Dyck, Kogan, McPherson, Weissman, Newacheck 2004). However,

evidence does reveal that white children are more likely to be diagnosed in early childhood compared to other racial groups (Jo, Schieve, Rice, Yeargin-Allsopp, Tian, Blumberg, Kogan and Boyle 2015). Betty, a Pineview Elementary parent, valued vague aspects of school quality such as good working skills and good teachers, as is shown in Table 4. When Betty weighed school options, she prioritized her daughter's disability.

We interviewed Betty, a white single mom who worked as a housekeeper, at her mother's home on a hot August afternoon. In addition to living with her mother, Betty lived with her two daughters in a small, two-bedroom home. We sat with her in the front room, with the screen door open because there was no air conditioning. Various holes covered the screen door and it did not shut all the way due to its bent frame. When we sat in the front room, we had a limited view of one of the bedrooms and a mattress inside the bedroom. No bedframe or stand accompanied the mattress as it was on the floor and Betty's mother rested on the mattress. Betty had actually moved around quite a lot in the last few years after dealing with drug addiction and spending time in detention centers. During her interview, Betty told us about her struggle to find a school that matched her priorities.

Betty desired a program where her daughter wasn't pulled out of regular classrooms; she recounted the following experience during her interview:

There was a woman that lived two apartment down and I actually considered her, to take her son there to Pine Elementary. And her son was in a normal class and he needed special needs class. So her son was at Scarlet Oak and I actually told her, 'You know what? Pineview is a really good school and my daughter is in a really good class and they teach 'em one on one. And she's like, 'Well, my son isn't learning anything. He's getting sent home with lots of homework that he can't do and he's struggling. And when he's at school he . . . just scribbling.' And I recommended her to go to Pineview.

Interviewer: Did she end up going?

Betty: Yeah, she did. She went an' the principal assistant told her your son has a behavior problem; he doesn't belong in a retarded class.

After this conversation, the principal recommended that Betty's friend send her child to Pineview as well. Betty, whose daughter is differently abled, was struggling in her original school. Betty prioritized the need for a special needs program for her daughter and ended enrolling him in Pineview Elementary. At Pineview, the special needs program fit Betty's priorities and she even told her neighbor about the program. Betty brought up the fact that school administration placed her children in "retard" [i.e. special based needs] classes and that this was highly offensive to parents and children. Betty fought back against the negative stereotypes that her child, and her friend's child, she sounded protective and indignant when she reiterated that the children are just a "little" different and they need support.

William, a white Birch Elementary dad, also emphasized the need for support for special needs children. William's son, Isaac, had a behavioral disorder. Early in Isaac's childhood, his family enrolled him in a school that matched his special needs. As Table 4 demonstrates, William valued schools that support the parents and this matched his priority, which was to find a school that gave his child the tools to succeed. William enrolled Isaac in Birch Elementary because of their behavioral disorder program's reputation:

Yeah, an' then matter of fact that's why he goes there is because of that BD [behavioral disorder]. I think that if he would've started out mainstreaming, I don't think he would be where he's at now. I think he would've gotten lost. I think he would've gotten labeled as a bad kid. You know 'cause he got diagnosed really early.

After Isaac was diagnosed early in his childhood with a behavioral disorder, William expressed that finding a special needs program was his top priority in choosing a school. Finding a school that matched his priorities not only gave support to him as a parent, but also William felt that Isaac would have greater chances of success in educational institutions.

Alice, a white Maple Elementary parent, expressed a similar priority when selecting a school for her son. Alice lived in a small brick home with her husband and son, Archie. Alice worked part-time at a call center, and her husband cut hair at a local barbershop. Alice used to live on the North side of town, and she was aware that schools there were high-performing. In fact, her oldest son, who was 16, attended high school on the north side. In contrast, Archie, her younger son, attended the low-performing Maple Elementary due to that school's special needs program's emphasis for autistic children. When describing what she valued in schools, Alice was quite vague (Table 5), but specific when discussing her priorities. Archie had been diagnosed on the autism spectrum when he was quite young, and Alice discussed how that shaped her priorities when weighing school options.

Maple Elementary's autism special needs program had a unique classroom structure, which Alice felt, "would be more beneficial to him to [rather than being] in an enclosed classroom." The program also focused on reintegration to mainstream classrooms. Alice told us, "at this one [Maple Elementary] they have more supervision. They have different recess times and they do try to put them back in to being in a regular classroom sometimes. They try to integrate them back in." Alice expressed her hope in this program and that, eventually, Archie would have healthy interactions with other students in his school. Finding a program that was supportive towards Archie's autism was Alice's top priority. While it may seem obvious that parents would put their child's special needs at the forefront of their decision-making, few parents listed special needs programs as something they valued as school quality. It did however, become a major priority when their children had special needs. In summary, the specific priority of special needs was mostly a white narrative.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

*Social Connections—a Polynesian Story.* Social connections were the final priority that emerged. All parents used social connections to weigh information about potential schools for their children. Information from neighbors, church congregations, family, and friends were all used in decision processes. While all parents used social connections, using social connections as a top priority was largely a Polynesian story. Aspen Charter, the sole charter school in my sample, emphasized cultural learning experiences, especially Polynesian culture. The emphasis on Polynesian culture combined with unique recruitment methods might have explained the top prioritization of social connections among Polynesian parents who chose this school. The founder constantly reiterated information about school quality, often regarding discipline, through Polynesian social networks, which were also known as the “coconut wire.” Meilani, a Polynesian Aspen Charter mom, described her school decision-making process to us. Aspen Charter was not only near her home, but a woman in her social network used recruitment methods to persuade Meilani to attend Aspen Charter.

We actually knew one of the ladies that brought up Aspen Charter [ . . . ] we knew she was good, pretty good teacher. Or just to watch over our kids, know she was good.

Meilani knew this individual through their children’s after-school football practices and described her as “responsible” because she was always at football practices. Her friend not only brought up Aspen Charter, but she also worked there as a teacher, and she promised Meilani that she would watch over Meilani’s children at the school. Viewing this woman as responsible increased the inclination to consider Aspen Charter.

La’akea, a Tongan parent, recently enrolled her children at Aspen Charter. La’akea and her family were new to the area and she was worked as a cashier at the UPS store. In fact, as is referred to in Table 5, La’akea valued “regular schools” but chose Aspen Charter because her

aunt essentially told her where to enroll the children. La'akea, her husband and children, all lived with La'akea's aunt. La'akea's aunt spoke highly of Aspen Charter and the fact that they emphasized culture. Information for her aunt was the top priority used in making a school decision. Because of culture importance, La'akea's aunt's opinion mattered immensely. It mattered so much to the point where La'akea did not consider other neighborhood schools, and enrolled her children at Aspen Charter during her initial visit.

Lea, a Samoan single mom, also sent her children to Aspen Charter and prioritized information about the school from her cousin, who was one of the school's founders.

Well . . . Number 1, when the idea of Aspen Charter was first brought to my attention, I thought wow, that's a great idea. And it was actually a cousin of mine who started the school.

Not only did Lea's cousin start the school, but she also reached out to Lea and asked her to recruit others through church meetings.

She contacted me and wanted to come speak at my church about the school, and I talked to our pastor and invited her, and she came down she spoke to our church [about Aspen Charter].

Lea used her influence among social connections, in this instance in church communities, to recruit for Aspen Charter. Lea loved the idea of a cultural emphasis in the school; she said, "I think there needs to be a balance of really celebrating your culture and knowing who you are and having a sense of identity." And while she strongly emphasized the importance of culture throughout her interview, the emphasis on social connections were stronger. In fact, she told other people of Polynesian background that they should also consider Aspen Charter.

Polynesians, a small overlooked ethnic group, can inform school decision-making research theoretically because disaggregating into ethnic groups provided important insights. Understanding Polynesian culture allowed me to grasp how highly they prioritized their social

connections. Social connections were prioritized so much that it outweighed going to a failing school or a new school about which they knew nothing. It is evident throughout my analysis that among Polynesian parents, they prioritized school decision-making in unique ways compared to white parents. A similar conclusion can be said for Latino parents, who prioritized emotional needs, and white parents in their prioritization of special needs.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My research question investigates if racial differences are present among white, Latino, and Polynesian parents as they weigh different school options. The data from this project suggests that distinct racial patterns arise in what parents' prioritize in school decision-making and what they value about schools.

Previous research (Rowley, Barriga, Dufur and Child 2017) explores meanings associated with traditional measures of school quality and found that these definitions can be code for white majority schools. My thesis expands this research by looking at race-based differences. I argue that a subset of Polynesians and whites exhibit white flight attitudes similar to ones described in the literature (Renzulli and Evans 2005). The white flight hypothesis entails that white families are more likely to leave neighborhoods with higher populations of minority families (Crowder 2000). It is salient to recall some Polynesian and white parents' reactions to schools with high levels of Latino students. These schools are called "ghetto" and regarded as dangerous options for their children. This illustrates that some Polynesian parents use similar values and priorities to white parents within my sample. In these instances, values do not quite match what parents

actually prioritize. This is typical among some of the status priorities, such as when parents claim to value high academics and test scores but prioritize a white demographic status.

Previous research also contends that a disconnect occurs within disadvantaged parents' decision-making. Parents claim to value traditional indicators of school quality (Roda and Wells 2013) but often choose low-performing schools (Stevens, Torre and Johnson 2011). My research demonstrates that, at times, parents who encounter social and economic disadvantages do not always value test scores and academic reputation. Instead, they value other attributes that may be more salient in their everyday lives. For some parents, this means their values and priorities closely match. This was most common among Latino parents, who commonly value individual attention and respect, and prioritized dignity (see Table 3). Latino parents do not exhibit negative attitudes towards white or Polynesian students in schools. Instead of focusing on external aspects, such as demographics, Latino parents closely align their values and priorities around respect. They place their children's emotional needs as a top priority and express a need for dignity when choosing a new school.

This pattern may be evidence that Latino parents are aware of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior towards Latinos in the community. In my sample, Latinos have the highest number of immigrant parents, which raises inquiries about the treatment of immigrants in this area. In addition, Latino parents share narratives of schools ignoring their requests for help with issues such as bullying. Compared to Latinos, white and Polynesian parents do not vehemently express negative interactions within educational institutions. Perhaps Latino parents think the one aspect they can control regarding their children's education is how their children are treated, thus, explaining their high prioritization of dignity. Therefore, policymakers should

give attention to not only *what* Latino and other minority families value, but also *why* they prioritize certain aspects in schools.

To illustrate, white parents' emphasis on special needs does not signify that Latino and Polynesian parents do not have children with special needs. Instead, this could be an indicator that white parents have better access to information about specialized programs and access to diagnoses from health professionals. This raises questions as to whether or not Latino and Polynesian parents are aware of special need programs in nearby local schools or have equal access to health professionals. My specific subsample cannot address this question, but it would be an important topic for future research. If education policymakers want to understand how disadvantaged families with special needs children make school decisions, it is pertinent to understand how race shapes access to information and perceptions about special needs programs.

It also is pertinent to understand how racial groups use information from social networks in varying degrees. Social networks were said to “hold the social fabric” of Polynesian communities together (Cave and Hall 2015) and my research demonstrates this. Polynesian parents firmly prioritize social connections as they weigh school options. Although Polynesians are a small percentage of the population, studying their school decision-making processes matters because it implies that race, and cultures associated with race, affect school decision processes. Indeed, culture should matter for other minority groups and it does not benefit policymakers to lump together smaller ethnic groups. If school choice policymakers wanted to reach Polynesian communities in the United States, it would be imperative to reach out through their social networks.

Due to the emphasis of school choice by current political leaders such as Betsy DeVos (U.S. Department of Education 2017), policymakers must understand racial components of

school decision-making. They should examine differences among disadvantaged parents, including racial differences, and not aggregate their school choice processes. In order to do this, policymakers must first keep the possibility of white flight in mind when creating alternative school options. If schools meant for equalizing opportunity enable white flight, these alternative school options essentially fail their purpose.

Second, policymakers should target parents' actual values when creating alternative school options. Often times, the conversation around school choice encompasses the idea of attending high-performing schools. Policymakers should not assume that parents who face social and economic disadvantages value traditional definitions of school quality. They should take into account that differences in values do not signal a lack of care towards children's education. Instead, this could mean that varying constraints and priorities are active within decision processes for families who encounter social and economic disadvantages.

Third, policymakers must be serious about reaching out to different ethnic groups and not aggregating all minority groups together. Studying disaggregated groups, such as immigrants, would contribute to the knowledge of school decision-making. Immigrants have unique experiences and knowledge about education due to living in different countries. This may influence how they think about school decision processes. The inter-mountain school district in my study, which has a high number of immigrants, translates their services into a multitude of different languages as an effort to reach a wide range of backgrounds. Regardless of this effort, some families are not using school choice policies in the "intended" way. While translation services are useful resources, more observation of unique processes within culture may reveal how to better reach disaggregated groups.

While clear decision-making differences exist among Polynesian, Latino, and white parents, one limitation that my research exhibited was that my analytic sample was not ethnically representative of different nationalities. In particular, the majority of Latino respondents were parents of Mexican descent, and mostly Samoan and Tongan for Polynesian respondents. Latinos and Polynesians are not a monolith, and so this research cannot speak for all nationalities within racial groups. It would be interesting for future research to study other highly represented ethnic groups in the United States, such as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Hawaiians. In spite of this limitation, the narratives found throughout this analysis remain compelling and provide significant insights. School choice research should also examine additional groups such as non-immigrant and refugee families.

Another potential limitation in my research is due to the new charter school, Aspen. Because Aspen Charter emphasizes Polynesian culture and is within driving distance for many in the area, it leads to a large number of Polynesian respondents prioritizing social connections, and in turn enrolling their children in this institution. Although this initially seems like a limitation, it actually allows me to discover clear patterns within this group. The findings from the Polynesian subsample strongly demonstrate that the information existent in literature about Polynesians can be related to school decision processes.

Future research would also benefit from observing families entering the school enrollment process for the first time and interviewing them as they make their decision. Throughout my research, we targeted families who had kindergartners and had recently gone

through the school enrollment process. However, the interviews occurred post-enrollment and this might have influenced parents' responses.

A potential implication that my research highlights is one of short term benefits but long-term disadvantages when choosing lower-performing schools. Parents in my study show that they make deliberate decisions with regard to their children's education and prioritize aspects that they feel will ensure their child's success. Take for example, Latino parents who decide to enroll their children in a failing school to ensure their emotional needs are being met. Emotional well-being probably affects a child's performance in elementary school and it is beneficial for a child to attend a school where they feel safe and respected. This would be a short-term benefit. However, it may lead to long-term disadvantages because the literature shows that attending a higher-performing school has positive individual outcomes (Phillips, Hausman and Larsen 2011). Parents are potentially using school choice policies that could affect their children negatively in the long-term. This presents itself as a situation where patterns of racial stratification are replicated and one that should be addressed by policymakers.

Taken together, my findings suggest that race has a powerful influence in school decision-making, at least among parents who encounter social and economic disadvantages. Policymakers should pay attention to the power of race in school decision-making. When looking at disaggregated racial groups, clear differences arise in how parents weigh school decisions. All families should have access to better options in schooling, and school choice policies should be crafted to account for decision-making across racial groups.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An important note about the Latino population is that Latino subgroups differ substantially in SES, age, nationality, and legal status (Smith, Stern, and Shatrova 2008). One way my research addresses this problem is that the Latino subsample with my study has similar socioeconomic status and nationality backgrounds.

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TABLES

*Table 1. Top Priorities by Race*

Top Priority	White	Polynesian	Latino	Total
	<u>n=11</u>	<u>n=13</u>	<u>n=11</u>	<u>n=35</u>
Status	27%	38%	18%	29%
Emotional Needs	0%	15%	64%	26%
Social Connections	18%	46%	9%	26%
Special Needs	55%	0%	9%	20%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

*Table 2. Status Priorities*

<i>Parent</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>Top Priority</i>
Fetia	Polynesian	High academics	Status (demographics)
Rosi	Polynesian	Private school	Status (charter=private)
Glenn	White	Private School	Status (charter = private)
Marlin	White	(Vague) good test scores, special needs programs	Status (demographics)
Sydney	White	Test scores	Status (demographics)

*Table 3. Emotional Needs Priorities*

<i>Parent</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>Priorities</i>
Sofia	Latino	Good academic reputation	Emotional needs: bullying
Darla	Latino	Individual attention for kids	Stability
Mariana	Latino	Individual attention for kids	Emotional needs: bullying
Alejandra	Latino	Individual attention for kids	Emotional needs: smaller class sizes
Katherine	Latino	Good discipline	Individual attention for kids

*Table 4. Special Needs Priorities*

<i>Parent</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>Priority</i>
Alice	White	Listen and interact with the children, best resources to help child succeed	Autism based special needs
William	White	Support system to the parents	Behavioral disorder special needs
Betty	White	(Vague) Good walking distance, good teachers, good working skills	Special needs
Veronica	White	(Vague) Good student teacher ratio, clean, library, equipment	ADD special based need
Cheryl	White	treats child normal regardless of ADHD	ADHD special based need

*Table 5. Social Connections Priorities*

<i>Parent</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Values</i>	<i>Top Priority</i>
Lea	Polynesian	Rigorous academic program, reflects the real world.	Social connection
La'akea	Polynesian	Regular school where they teach kids all the subjects (vague)	Social Connection
Meilani	Polynesian	Teachers help the kids (vague)	Social connection
Kalani	Polynesian	Private school	Social connection
Hailey	Polynesian	Challenges the students in terms of critical thinking	Social connection

## 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.
- 

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
  - How many kids do you have?
- We are interested in multiracial families. Is your family multiracial?
  - 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]

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]?

Which adult in your life would you say was most involved in making decisions related to your education when you were young?

[Note: We simply want to find out who was most influential—a parent, grandparent, aunt, etc. The next bold question should focus on this person.]

- For example, if someone at the school needed to talk to an adult about you, who would have been the best person to call?
- Or, who helped you with homework?

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?

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?

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]

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?

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

2. *Where did you get your information about the school?*

- Did you talk to anyone? Who?
- Did you get information from anywhere else?

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.]

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

2. *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.)

Wrap up

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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.